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ABSTRACT

A handbook for those involved in Southeast Asian refugee assistance discusses some of the values and customs that refugee groups from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam may have in common and looks at the different countries and peoples of the region. A section on the shared values and customs of Indochinese refugees focuses on aspects of family life, religion, eating habits, education, and employment patterns. Subsequent sections on the three individual countries examine their geography and climate, history, national symbols, demography, family life, language, customs, traditions, and beliefs. Within each country, individual ethnic groups and their characteristics are described. (MSE)

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The Peoples and Cultures of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handbook is to acquaint you with the cultures of the refugees you are assisting. Most of us take for granted that all people behave the way we do. However, people differ a great deal. Differences in gestures, basic etiquette, ways of communicating, family life and almost all other areas of interaction can create practical problems if both parties are not aware of them. Sometimes a gesture of friendship—such as a hug or a kiss—may be misunderstood or viewed as offensive. On the other hand, a gesture of respect, such as avoiding eye contact, may be viewed as a sign of unfriendliness or lack of attention. For this reason, this handbook and the companion refugee handbook focus on these types of differences.

The refugees are in a new country and strange culture, and have been through many traumatic experiences to get here. They will need time to adjust. You can help in this adjustment by "meeting the refugees halfway" in the initial stages of their resettlement. To do this, you need to be familiar with their cultures, customs and beliefs. An awareness of some basic cultural facts and differences can help to be more effective in sponsoring or working with them.

This handbook begins by discussing some of the values and customs that refugees coming from Southeast Asia may have in common. It is necessary, however, to keep in mind that the refugees called "Indochinese" come from several different countries and ethnic groups with many dissimilar cultural backgrounds. The second part of this handbook focuses on the different countries and peoples of Southeast Asia.

Handbooks such as this cannot answer all the questions you may have. They can only give you a general idea of the various cultures, and refugee needs and problems. Each case is different; it will take time for you to get to know each other. We encourage you to use as many different resources as are available and helpful to you: other books and written materials; the expertise of refugees who have lived here for some time; local resettlement workers and experienced sponsors; community services; and national services and resources. Using such resources, together with information such as this handbook provides, can make the undertaking more effective and fulfilling.

THE COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES OF INDOCHINA

Geographically, Indochina reflects the portion of mainland Southeast Asia between India and China comprised of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. Politically, however, the name "Indochina" applies to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, the countries which once made up what was known as "French Indochina."

The history of French Indochina began in 1983, when the French first proclaimed the Indochinese Union, and ended around 1950 when separate treaties were ratified recognizing Vietnam (under ex-Emperor Bao Dai), Cambodia and Laos as independent self-governing states within the French Union. After the Geneva Conference in 1954, France lost control over these three nations and the name "Indochina" no longer had any political or constitutional meaning. In fact, it was only between the years of 1893 and 1954 that these countries were not independent, and they differ from each other historically, linguistically and, in many respects, culturally.

SHARED VALUES AND CUSTOMS OF "INDOCHINESE" REFUGEES

Southeast Asia has historically been a cross-roads of cultural activity. For more than two thousand years, Chinese, Indian and Oceanic peoples have influenced the languages, customs and institutions of the area. To these have been added European Christian influences during the past five hundred years, resulting in a great diversity of lifestyles among the present peoples of Southeast Asia. For example, there are over sixteen major languages within Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Many refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam reject the term "Indochinese" because of its colonial connotations. However, the term is widely used in the U.S. in government and social services. In fact, there is no single "Indochinese" cultural type. Many social customs and values, however, have some common aspects.

Top: The Royal Palace in Phnom Penh (Cambodia)
Bottom left: Members of the highland Hmong tribe (Laos)
Bottom right: Vietnamese junks in Ha Long Bay

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FAMILY LIFE

The "typical" family unit in Southeast Asia is larger than that in the United States. The typical American family consists of the father, mother and children under the age of 18 living together in the home. Grandparents and other relatives usually live apart. In traditional Indochinese culture, the basic family unit is an extended one that includes not only parents and their children, but grandparents, married children, aunts and uncles, and other relatives as well. They may all

Left: Hmong family working on their farm (Laos)
Below: Highland home (Vietnam)

live together in a single household or in close proximity, although this obviously changes in times of war.

In the Indochinese family a great deal of respect is paid by children and youth to parents and the elderly. The father is accepted as the head of the household in the immediate family even though he might not be the sole wage earner (especially among the labor class and in rural areas). As head of household, he is charged with upholding the family traditions and setting moral standards for his children. The mother is often responsible for maintaining the household budget and promoting family unity. When the parents are not present, the oldest child must take over the responsibilities as the family head. It is not unusual for older brothers or sisters to take care of their siblings. The younger children obey and respect the older brother or sister almost as much as they do their parents.

Refugee families sometimes lose some of their closeness as they adapt to life in America, particularly when children take on American customs and practices more quickly than their parents. Because of strong family ties, refugees may seek out relatives who have resettled in the United States and may want to move in order to live closer to them.

The water buffalo is an important part of the family farm.

RELIGION

It would be no more accurate to discuss "Indochinese religion" than "American religion." There is great diversity among and within the countries of Indochina, which contain numerous sects and religious traditions. Indochinese may practice Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism or other religions such as Christianity or Judaism. In some Indochinese cultures, ancestor worship and spiritual reverence to gods or objects may also occur.

A common theme of Eastern religions is the search for peace and harmony. The Indochinese seek freedom from conflict and uncertainty through their religions, whether seeking contentment in this life or through reincarnation (rebirth) in the next.

Great respect is given to ancestors. People from these countries often commemorate the anniversary of an ancestor's death rather than the birth, and some place great importance on visiting and caring for the tombs or memorials of their deceased relatives. Some refugees find their separation from

Religious beliefs influence every part of Indochinese life
Far left: Thien Mu tower (Vietnam)
Left: Angkor Wat (Cambodia)
Below: New Year festival (Laos)

their homeland made even more painful by their inability to visit the graves of their ancestors. Their funeral practices are very different from those found in America and often lead to misunderstanding and problems between refugees and Americans. The practice of honoring ancestors is commonly called "ancestor worship." However, the term "worship" here means an act of commemoration, rather than the adoration that is reserved for a god.

Many Indochinese prefer to die at home rather than in a hospital or nursing home. A peaceful death in the comforting presence of one's relatives and friends is often desired over the complicated and confusing technologies of an American hospital. Customs regarding the use of a funeral home, morgue or mortuary may be foreign and threatening to some Indochinese. In the event of death, care should be taken so that traditional customs are accommodated as far as the law permits.

Traditional medical practices of some Indochinese are tied closely to certain religious beliefs. Evil spirits or "evil winds" may require the presence of a Shaman, or folk doctor, who may prescribe herbal medicine or special kinds of massage to alleviate illness or disease.

It is the general policy of the voluntary agencies not to impose religious beliefs on refugees. Because some refugees are sponsored by church groups, there have some instances in which a refugee has felt pressured to convert. Refugees may wish to express gratitude in a number of ways, and church-going may be one of these. It should not be mistaken for an interest in conversion or even in the sponsor's religion. Like other immigrants who have come to this country, refugees will cherish the freedom to maintain their own religious practices and beliefs and to instill them in their children.

EATING HABITS

In many of the cultures of Southeast Asia, the first question a person asks on meeting a friend or an acquaintance, especially around meal time, would not be "How are you?" but rather, something like "Have you eaten yet?" Food and related hospitality are an important of the Indochinese cultures.

American food and methods of preparation will be unfamiliar to most refugees, and at first—maybe for months—it may be distasteful or unappetizing.

Ingredients used in the preparation of the various foods

common to Indochinese cultures are generally available in the United States and can usually be found in Oriental grocery stores in larger cities or where there are large refugee populations.

EDUCATION

Refugees coming into the United States bring with them a wide range of educational backgrounds. Some may have limited literacy, while others may be college graduates with advanced degrees. It has generally been the case, however, that schooling in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam has been disrupted since 1975, and many younger refugees may not have attended any school at all since that time.

These people tend to place great value on education, which may be rooted in various religious traditions that stress both understanding and harmony and respect for ancestors. This traditional emphasis on education is helpful to the newly-arrived refugee who has much to learn in adapting to a foreign country.

The school systems in Indochina have been based on the French system, as a result of the French colonial period in Indochina. This approach emphasizes the passing of information from teacher to student largely through lecture and memorization. Teachers are highly respected, and no one would consider questioning either the information a teacher provides or the way in which it is provided. Therefore, refugee children in the United States may have difficulty adjusting to the American style of learning, where discussion and questioning are preferred and encouraged.

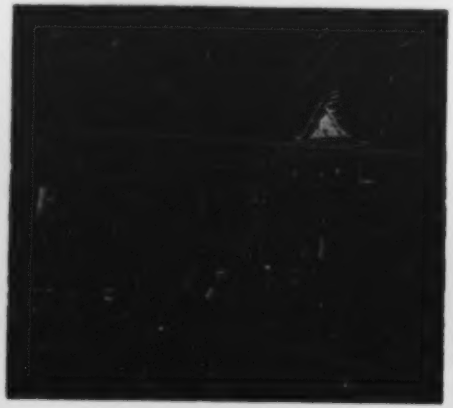
Indochinese parents who have previously left education up to the teacher may find it difficult if asked to actively participate in the education of their children by meeting with teachers or school officials.

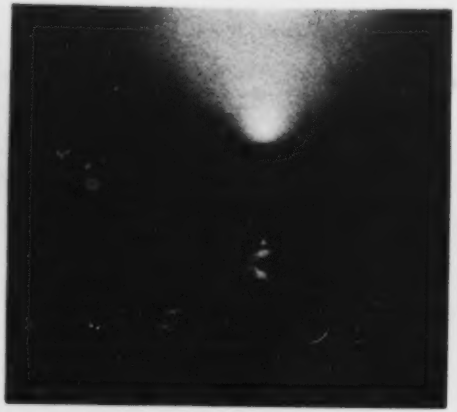
EMPLOYMENT

The notion of change and upward mobility are prevalent in the United States. This will be a new concept to most refugees who grew up in a system where people devote their entire lives to working at a single job or for a single business. Because of this, some refugees may be reluctant to accept work which they believe to be below their talents or former positions. Manual labor is traditionally given low status in Indochina.

For those refugees who have lived in small villages or isolated areas and are used to farming, hunting and fishing—working continually to insure their survival—the idea that a person may work a set amount of hours a day or days a week will seem strange.

The following sections discuss Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam as distinct political entities. The largest ethnic groups in each country are also discussed.





Cambodia

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Cambodia is a rich agricultural country bordered by Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. It has an area of approximately 69,900 square miles, about the size of the state of Missourt.

Much of the country's area is rolling plain. Dominant features are the large, near centrally-located Tonle Sap (Great Lake), and the Mekong River, which traverses the country from north to south. Mountain ranges are situated in the west, north and northeast.

Rice paddies are irrigated in rural Cambodia

The climate is tropical and hot, with a rainy season extending from mid-April to October. The mountain barriers provide the interior with a drier climate than most Southeast Asian countries. Temperature is rather constant throughout the country, averaging about 77° F.

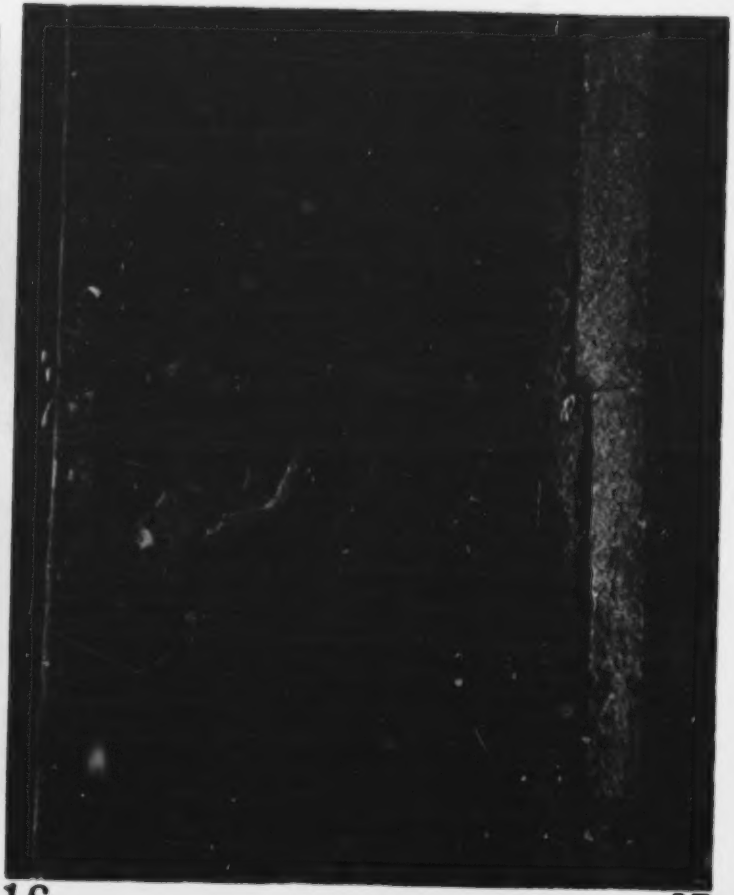
The majority of Cambodians live in villages and are engaged in subsistence agriculture, chiefly rice paddies and orchards. Large landholders are few; landless tenants are relatively unknown. Food is sufficient in normal times, and farmers generally have had an adequate standard of living.

HISTORY

The recorded history of Cambodia dates back to the first century A.D., when it was known as Funan (100-500 A.D.). This was followed by the Angkor period which lasted until 1432. It was a period of great accomplishments in culture, arts and architecture. At its peak, the empire extended from the Annamite Chain in present-day southern Vietnam to the Gulf of Thailand. The temples at Angkor were erected during this period, which has been described as the height of Cambodian domination in Southeast Asia.

At the end of the 13th century, the empire disintegrated into small kingdoms often ruled by Thai vassals. The struggle for territory between the Thais, Cambodians and Vietnamese has continued to the present. Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1864, and achieved complete independence under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk after the 1954 Geneva Conference.

Angkor Wat is one of the seven wonders of the world. A two-and-a-half mile long moat surrounds the ornamented galleries, with five lotus bud towers reaching 215 feet into the sky. Heavenly dancers, called "Asparas," are carved into walls and pillars. A half-mile long bas relief in sandstone displays legends from the Hindu Ramayana. Villagers used to enjoy performances of the Royal Cambodian Ballet at Angkor Wat.



In 1970, Sihanouk was overthrown by his prime minister, General Lon-Nol. That same year, Cambodia was the target of attacks from the spreading war in Vietnam. This spurred the growth of the Khmer communist faction (Khmer Rouge), which gained control of the country in 1975, under the leadership of Pol Pot. In 1979, Vietnamese communists overran Cambodia and installed a government headed by Heng Samrin. Pol Pot and his supporters escaped into the jungle and initiated an ongoing guerrilla campaign with the hope of regaining control of Cambodia from the Vietnamese communists. Nationalist factions—called Khmer Serei ("Free Khmer")—are also fighting to re-establish Cambodia as an independent and neutral country.

Angkor Wat is displayed on the Cambodian flag

Memorial commemorating land returned to Cambodia from Siam (Thailand)

National Symbols

Angkor Wat (Angkor Temple) is the soul of Cambodia, symbolizing the past civilization and the greatness of the country. This is why the Angkor Temple is displayed on the flag of Cambodia. The national flag has three colors: blue, white and red. Blue symbolizes morality, representing the spirits of honesty, justice and happiness of the Cambodian people. White symbolizes purity and uprightness and represents the Buddhist religion. Red represents the spirit of courage and determination.

THE PEOPLE OF CAMBODIA

The population of Cambodia was estimated at 7.1 million in 1972 and 8 million in 1975. About 85% of this number was ethnic Khmer (Cambodian). The rest consists of Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham (Khmer Muslims).

A considerable number of Khmer live outside of the country in parts of Thailand and southern Vietnam that were formerly part of the Cambodian kingdom. Those in Thailand are estimated to number 700,000. The Cambodians in Vietnam reside almost entirely in the Mekong Delta region and have been estimated to number as many as 500,000.

After five years under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, and the resultant starvation, disease, as well as continuous fighting between the Vietnamese troops and the Khmer communists, only three or four million people are believed to remain.

Most of Cambodia's population lives in rural areas

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

All Cambodians, adults and children alike, have recently undergone much hardship. Their country, once beautiful and peaceful, has been torn apart by war, with burned buildings and houses, destroyed bridges, and bombed schools and marketplaces. Many Cambodians have witnessed the senseless killing of innocent people and the complete destruction of their modern economic and social systems. Those who tried to escape from the killing, starvation and foreign domination were subjected to horrifying brutality, including robbery and rape.

In the face of these traumas, the Cambodian people have been psychologically devastated. Even after having been resettled, they still think about and grieve for loved ones who have died or disappeared to places unknown. They are also gravely concerned by the loss of their nation, now under foreign domination.

FAMILY LIFE

Although Cambodian society is family-oriented, the close, nuclear family is more prevalent than the extended family found in other Southeast Asian cultures. The extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, may live as a unit in rural areas, where financial considerations may force them into a single household. In normal times, the Cambodian family is likely to be economically independent, owning its own home and enough land to be self-sufficient.

Religious practices and socialization usually take place within the structure of the family. A great deal of respect is given to the specific roles of males and females. Boys are expected to be actively involved in community and religious life, while traditionally, girls best represent the family by marrying someone deserving of her family's respect. Within the family, the wife maintains an important, highly respected role. She is primarily responsible for the education of the children in social and moral matters. In some respects she is the leader of the family. She may, for example, handle all financial matters. As a result, the wife is typically given great respect both within the family and by the community at large.

The beautiful city of Phnom Penh, before the advent of communist rule in Cambodia. Its citizens were driven out by the Khmer Rouge to work in the fields. Phnom Penh is now reviving some of its former vitality.

The deckhouse on this large sampan is home for the owner

Marriage

Cambodians, particularly those living in rural areas, maintain very traditional values regarding sexual behavior. Sexual matters are not openly discussed, and parents refrain from specific sex education, particularly with daughters. At the time of marriage, the bride-to-be receives basic instruction regarding sex from her female relatives.

Due to the importance given to the marriage, the parents usually arrange the match while the couple learns to accept each other. The wedding ceremony takes place at the bride's house. Traditionally, it was celebrated for three days, but after 1970 it lasted for only one day, due to security reasons.

Men usually marry between 23 and 30 years of age, women between the ages of 16 and 22.

Marital fidelity is considered more important for women than for men. In fact, all sexual standards tend to be considerably more flexible for men than for women.

Divorce is legal but not common, and is usually discouraged. It is allowed only after the reconciliatory efforts of the husband and wife have failed, and it is very rare to have the proceedings brought to the courts. The divorce rate in Cambodia is very low.

LANGUAGE

Khmer (also known as Cambodian) is the official language of Cambodia and is the mother tongue of the ethnic Khmer. It is quite different from Vietnamese, Lao and Thai. Khmer, unlike other languages of Indochina, is non-tonal and has a number of two-syllable words. Because of the extensive historical ties of the Khmer people to the culture of India, the language has many loan words from Sanskrit relating to administrative, political, military and literary subjects.

The Cambodian writing system is complex. There are 66 consonant symbols, 35 vowel symbols, 33 superscripts, and 33 subscripts.

Names

Before the French arrived, every Cambodian had one given name, such as Ek, Bo, Phal, or Chamreun. Cambodian

names possess a great deal of personal, specialized meaning, having been chosen by an astrologist who has studied the individual's horoscope. Because of the importance of the name, Cambodian people prefer to be addressed by their given names.

The system of surname-given name was arbitrarily imposed by the French. The last name, or family name, is usually the name of a great-grandfather, grandfather or father. The last name always precedes the given name. Sok San: Sok (last name); San (given name).

It should also be noted that Cambodians do not have middle names, even though they may have three names. The first name is the surname and the second and third names are the given name. For example, Sok Sam Bo: Sok (last or family name); Sam Bo (given name).

Sometimes Cambodians take their fathers' given names for their last names. This happens usually in remote areas of Cambodia where an individual's birth has not been recorded. For example:

Father's name: Sok Chan
Son's name: Chan Trea
Sok: father's last name
Chan: father's given name

The son took his father's first name for his surname.

Informally, a woman is called by her given name, and formally by her husband's name. For example, Miss Rita Bopha, married to Mr. Sok San, is informally called Bopha and formally called Mrs. Sok San.

ក្នុងសុត្តន្តិកាយ្យ្រតង់ជរាសូត្រ ព្រះពុទ្ធ្រង់មានបន្ទូល
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រស់ទៅ " ។

In the Jarasutta of the Sanyutta Nikaya, the Buddha said to Ananda, "So it is, Ananda, old age is by nature inherent in youth, sickness in health, and death in life."

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Religion

Theravada Buddhism has been the official religion in Cambodia and is followed by nearly 85% of the population. Buddhism does not require a belief in God and is compatible with other religious beliefs. It requires its followers to take full responsibility for their own actions.

Right: Buddhist monk
Below: Tombs and crematoriums are built to honor ancestors

Buddhism influences every aspect of life. The pagoda, or temple, is the center of the community in rural areas. In larger cities, due to the increasing influence of modern life, traditional practices have decreased or taken on new forms.

In some remote areas, Cambodians practice animism, a belief in supernatural beings, which include spirits of ancestors and demons, as well as some objects such as trees and stones. Such beliefs, however, are becoming less prominent as Buddhism and Western philosophy expand. Christianity is also found in Cambodia. In 1975, it was estimated that 30,000 Christians lived in Phnom Penh alone.

Holidays and Celebrations

There are several religious holidays that allow every Buddhist to have time to prepare food and other offerings for a celebration at the pagoda in the presence of Buddhist monks.

The biggest Khmer holiday is the New Year, a three-day celebration beginning on April 13. It is a time for visiting relatives and friends, taking food to the temple, and attending religious ceremonies and classical dance performances.

The most important ceremony for Cambodians is "All Souls' Day," a day of prayer for the souls of those who have died. It is regularly celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month on the lunar calendar (September). Another important holiday commemorates Buddha's birth, his subsequent enlightenment and finally his death. This is celebrated May 18th.

Weddings are also important occasions and are celebrated with a morning religious ceremony followed by an afternoon party with large gatherings of family and friends and plenty of food.

Many members of the Royal Ballet did not survive the Khmer Rouge regime, but those who did are working to preserve the art form. This young dancer was photographed at a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand.

Khmer Music

Music is part of daily Khmer life. From boxing matches to weddings, there is always live music to accompany the event. The epic form, in which male singers are accompanied by a chapei (similar to a guitar), is very popular with many Cambodians. There are also lyrical forms, in which singers of both sexes sing joyful, spiritual or sentimental songs. The most popular musical form, that which has shown the greatest longevity, is the classical Khmer music known as *Mahori*. The folk dance, *Yikei*, is also very popular.

Like architecture, sculpture, literature or dance, Khmer music is characterized principally by its spiritual nature. Its purpose is to "purify the heart and elevate the mind."

Classical Dance

Khmer classical dance dates from the Angkor period. Dance is performed mostly by young girls and women, who represent legendary characters in a highly ritualistic style. In ancient times, the dance was done in honor of the temple gods, but today it serves a solely artistic purpose.

Above: Fresh vegetables are sold at market
Left: Dried fish, squid and octopus are staples in Cambodia

Food and Eating Habits

Cambodians always include rice with their meals. Breakfast is served with pork, chicken, fish or a light noodle soup made with chicken broth, steamed meat and dumplings. Lunch is generally rice with a vegetable, meat and sauce. Dinner is heavier and includes a soup and more vegetables. The meal is often followed by cool, refreshing desserts. Fresh fruits are a favorite.

Traditionally, hot drinks are served in the morning and cool drinks during the rest of the day. Iced tea with lemon and juices squeezed from fresh fruits are common.

Most Cambodians use only spoons to eat. Others use forks as well, and many Cambodians, usually of Chinese descent, use chopsticks.

Education

The first education in Cambodia was provided by Buddhist monks, whose earliest schools were formed in the 13th century. Instruction included not only the basic principles of Buddhism, but also literacy in Khmer. Public education began in the last century. Until 1975, education was provided at three levels:

Level 1: elementary school through grade 6;
Level 2: "lycee," a high school through grade 13; and
Level 3: university-level studies.

Education has been standardized throughout the country to the extent that the same text books are used in all classes of a particular level or grade. Under the present government,

students have begun to follow the same daily schedule throughout the country.

Most Cambodians now complete elementary school. Many continue beyond that into college and may complete post-graduate studies.

Social Customs

Many of the customs and practices of Cambodians differ from American ones. Cambodians greeting each other will place their hands, palms together, near their faces. The height of the hands is an indication of the esteem felt for the other person. When greeting a family, the husband is addressed first, then the wife. Children are greeted in order of their age, and while they may greet guests when they first arrive, they then leave the adults alone and never interrupt adult conversation.

The following are some Cambodian customs and attitudes that you may want to be particularly aware of. It is extremely insulting to touch a Cambodian's head, which is considered the most important part of the body—the place where the spirit resides. Feet, on the other hand, are the lowest part of the body in value; it is thus improper to point them at someone. It is also impolite to step over someone's feet or legs. Cambodian youth are comfortable with hugging or holding hands with someone of the same sex, and consider it a sign of friendship.

When passing in front of someone other than children or servants, Cambodians are expected to bow slightly from the waist as a sign of respect. Their politeness sometimes makes them appear shy to westerners. For example, indirectness seems much more polite to a Cambodian than direct confrontation.

Cambodians are accustomed to a much more leisurely pace than they find in America.

Many Cambodian practices may appear superstitious to Americans. For example, they might not want to be photographed with two other people because of their beliefs regarding the number three.

This mural gallery surrounds the Silver Pagoda compound at the palace in Phnom Penh

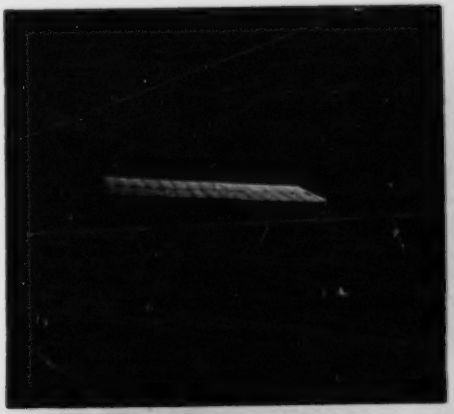
Laos

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

Laos is a landlocked country situated south of China, north of Cambodia, east of Thailand and Burma, and west of Vietnam. It has an area of 91,000 square miles—about the size of the State of Oregon. Its largest river is the Mekong, which enters Laos from the north and runs the length of the country. The soil of the Mekong River valley from central to southern Laos is very rich. The northern and eastern parts of Laos are mountainous. The Annamite Mountains in the east serve as a buffer against any large storms or hurricanes from the China Sea. Other than the occasional flooding of the Mekong, the Lao people have never experienced a major natural disaster. Even these floods cause little damage or injury, because the valley people live in houses built on stilts.

The economy of Laos is based largely on agriculture, rice being the most important product. Prior to the war in Vietnam, Laos's rice production was so extensive that much of it could be exported. Because of the lack of transportation and communication, economic development is limited. There are no railroads, and some of the highways are unusable several months of the year. Even the main waterway, the Mekong River, is interrupted by rapids at several points.

Right: A typical Lao home, on stilts
Below: The oxcart is a common means of transportation in Laos

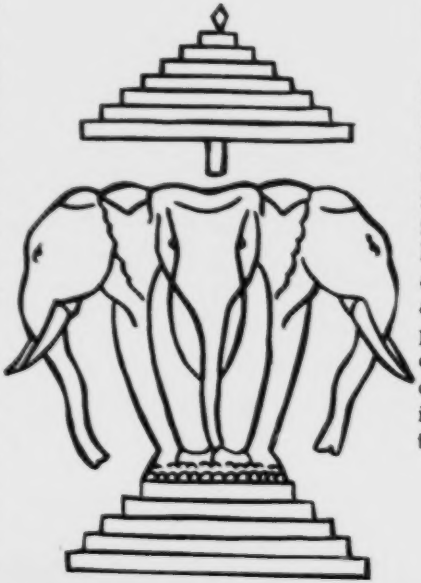


HISTORY

The Lao people moved from the Yunnan area of China and settled in the northern part of Laos in 658 A.D., eventually spreading throughout the present-day areas of Laos and Thailand. Many wars were fought among clans to gain domination. There were three major kingdoms in Laos by 1707. By 1779, the kingdoms were colonized by the King of Thailand. Many unsuccessful attempts by the Lao to free themselves from Thai domination followed. In 1893, France took control of Indochina and pressured the King of Thailand into relinquishing some of the Lao territory. A treaty was signed in 1907 dividing the Lao people into two nations, one under French control, the other under Thai.

During World War II, Japan conquered Laos, pushing the French out of the country. Its rule was short-lived, however, and France regained control in 1946. This resulted in many Lao leaders fleeing to Thailand to create a "Free Movement." The Movement was successful in 1949, when Laos was given greater independence by France, and many members of the "Free Movement" returned to Laos and participated in the formation of the new government. Others, however, remained in Thailand and founded a movement known as the "Pathet Lao," led by Prince Souphanouvong. The Pathet Lao was headquartered in northeastern Laos.

Subsequent years saw continuous power struggles between various factions for control of the government. During this time, in 1954, Laos achieved full independence. The power struggles continued, and Prince Souphanouvong was arrested. He later escaped to the jungle to join the Pathet Lao. A coalition government was formed in 1962, under the leadership of Souvanna Phouma, to demonstrate solidarity. This government received aid from the United States. This support was phased out, however, in 1973, when another coalition government—between the communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government—was being created. Communist control was total by December 1975. The current exodus of refugees from Laos began at that time, as those who resisted communist control escaped the country.



National Symbols

The National symbol of Laos, displayed on its flag, is that of a three-headed elephant, with a white parasol, on a five-step platform. The elephant signifies the three 16th century kingdoms of Laos; the parasol is a symbol of royalty; and the five steps of the platform stand for the five commandments of Buddhism that proscribe killing, stealing, lying, adultery, and abuse of alcohol.

THE PEOPLES OF LAOS

Although Laos is a thinly populated country, there are many ethnic groups living within its borders. The lowland Lao who live along the rivers constitute approximately half the population and is the largest single group. Other ethnic groups, upper-land (Lao Theung) and highland (Hmong and Mein) Lao, often support themselves by slash-and-burn farming. Although the government has encouraged increased interdependence, these groups have remained autonomous. All have their own languages and cultures, so assimilation into the broader Lao culture has been slow. The fact that 80% of the people live in villages has enabled them to retain their traditional beliefs.

THE LAO

FAMILY LIFE

The family is the central social unit in Laos. Larger, extended families are common, averaging six to eight members. It is not unusual for four generations to live in one house, including distant relatives both by blood and marriage. Each member is expected to respect the needs of the others.

Rice seedlings are transplanted when they are a month old

The man is the traditional head of the family. He makes critical decisions and is responsible for the general well-being of the household. Women take care of cooking, household chores, and financial matters. Children, whose respect and obedience are demanded, commonly remain in their parents' home even after marriage.

Marriage

Usually a marriage must be approved by both parents, and it is not unusual for a couple to be married at the recommendation of their elders. The groom or his family must pay a dowry to the parents of the intended bride. While the wedding celebration is traditionally held in the bride's home, the expenses for the wedding are usually covered by the bridegroom's family. Although it is very rare, Lao men may have several wives. The first one is his official, legal wife, while subsequent wives have a secondary role. All the offspring are considered his legal children. Because Lao refugees coming to the United States can only have one wife under U.S. law, those who have more than one wife sometimes decide to keep one and divorce the others before coming to this country.

Childbirth

To prepare for childbirth in the Lao countryside, the husband accumulates firewood and various medicines and herbs for his wife's recovery. When she goes into labor, he makes a fire in the fireplace inside the home, prepares a bamboo bed next to it and starts to boil water for cleaning the mother and

Shaman asks blessings for couple at Lao wedding ceremony

baby. When delivery is near, he is assisted by a midwife. The wife holds a rope suspended from the ceiling and the husband helps to support her while the midwife supervises the delivery. Most women who live in towns or cities have their babies in a hospital or clinic, however.

A woman usually takes at least 30 days to recover from her first delivery and a shorter recovery period after subsequent births. She spends this time close to the fireplace, bathing, drinking warm water boiled with medicines such as tree roots and herbs, and following a strict diet of chicken, certain types of fish, and rice with spices. Breast feeding is common.

At the end of this 30-day period, a ceremony is held for the mother and the baby. This ceremony, *Sou-Khouanh*, involves the calling of the child's and mother's souls to come back and remain with their bodies, for it is believed that the souls may have been scared away by the delivery of the child. The Sou-Khouanh is a well-wishing ceremony for the mother and baby and is led by a *Moh-Phone*, a shaman. After he recites the wishes, he ties white strings on the wrists of the mother and baby. Afterwards, friends and relatives join in the wishing and the tying of strings. This is usually followed by a feast.

Death and Funerals

Traditionally, burial is reserved for a person who has died of unnatural causes. Most people prefer cremation, their ashes being kept in a pagoda until a tower can be built for them. During the funeral preparations, the body is usually kept at home; there are no funeral homes in Laos. Older people usually prefer to die at home. If they should die elsewhere, their bodies or ashes would be brought home to be cremated or buried in their hometown. Any funeral ceremony must have Buddhist priests to be effective.

ໃນດ່ານແດນດິນສັນ ນະຄອນສີສະຕະນາກ
ຍິ່ນສນຸກມ່ວນຊົ່ນ ເມືອງຟ້າກໍ່ໄປ່ປານ.

ມໍ່ເມື່ອໝົດເຂດຟ້າ ເດືອນດ່ວນລະດູຝົນ
ເດືອນສິບສອງເພັ້ງ ພຸ້ນ ພຸ້ນ ພຸ້ນ ພຸ້ນ
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ຈຸດໝຸ້ຫຍ້ມຫຸ້ນໄຕ ບູ ຊາ ເຈ ້ າ ຫ ້ ນ ພຸ ດ ໄ ຫ.

No place,
Even the heavens,
Is as pleasant
As Nakhon Sisatanak. *

As soon as the monsoon
Is gone by,
And on the clear night
Of the full moon
Of the twelfth month,
People flock to worship
At That Luang. **

They light candles and incense
And pray to the Buddha.

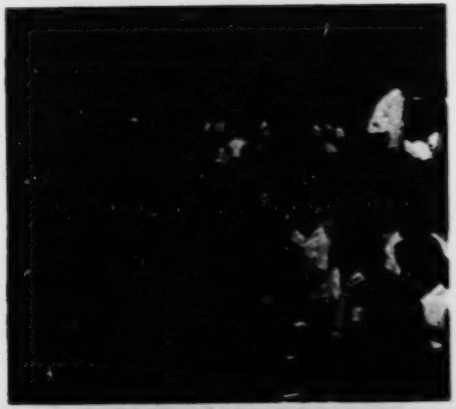
* Vientiane
** Memorial to the Buddha

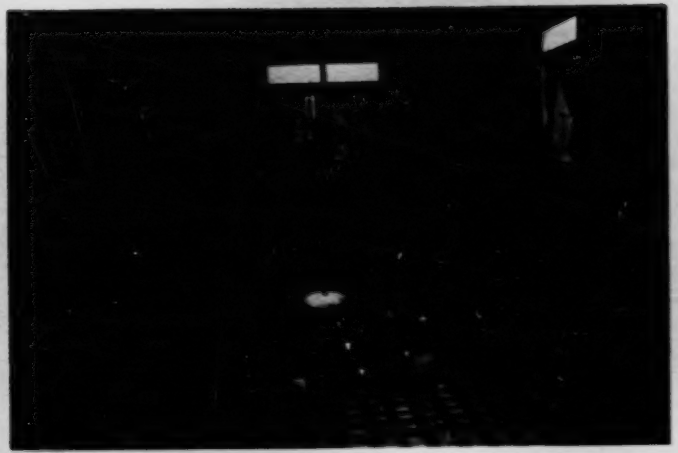
LANGUAGE

The Lao language is basically monosyllabic and tonal, but has extensively borrowed from Sanskrit and Pali, two languages of ancient India. In fact, most polysyllabic words relating to the government, courts, Buddhism, science and philosophy are of Sanskrit or Pali origin. The writing system is based on an alphabet (although not with Roman characters) and is written from left to right.

Names

Lao names are written in this way: Souksomboun Sayasithsena. Souksomboun is the first name and Sayasithsena is the last or family name. Most Lao names have a meaning, usually a positive one: Souksomboun means "health and abundance;" Sayasithsena means "victory." Lao people have only first and last names. Middle names are rare. After marriage, a woman normally takes her husband's name. For example, if the husband's name is Souksomboun Sayasithsena, and the wife's name is Douangkeo Malaythong, the wife's name becomes Douangkeo Sayasithsena. She would be called Mrs. Douangkeo; her husband would be called Mr. Souksomboun. Titles are used only with the first name, and last names are used only in writing, not in speech.





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CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Religion

The majority of Lao is Buddhist, while other religious traditions, including Christianity, Islam and Confucianism, are practiced by very small minorities. Buddhism has existed in Laos for approximately 200 years.

Buddhist monks have played the roles of teachers, counselors, healers, and community leaders, in addition to teaching the Dharma and maintaining traditional functions in their pagodas. Boys and young men can become novice monks, and women can become nuns, but only men may assume the role of monk.

Most Lao parents prefer having a son because he can enter the monkhood and participate in the preservation and teaching of Buddhism. Before marriage, most Lao men are required to enter monkhood at least for a short period of time (two to three weeks). This demonstrates gratitude to their parents for their upbringing and increases their wisdom.

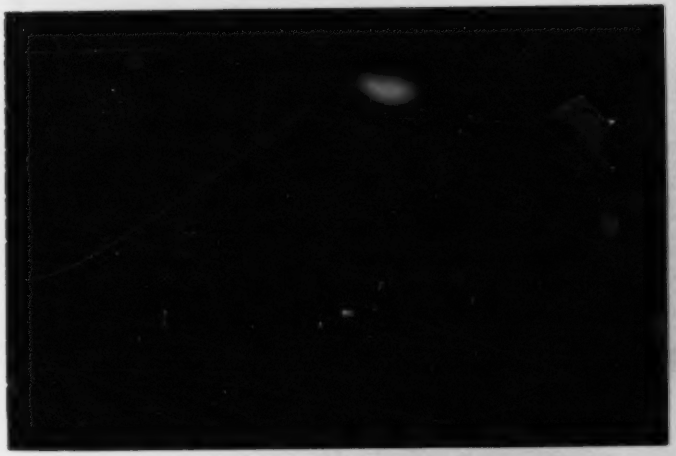
Lao Buddhists in the U.S. long for a place of worship. There is a deprivation of their spiritual needs without a pagoda or Buddhist monk. Though the practice of Buddhism is usually left to the individual, many ceremonies require the presence of monks. This spiritual support can maintain and improve their mental health and adaptability.

Facing page: Almost all Lao festivities are linked to Buddhism
Left: Alms, in the form of food, are offered to monks at all religious festivals. When the ceremony is held in the home, alms are offered the first thing in the morning, so the monk may have the first of his two daily meals. Monks may eat only in the morning.
Right: This wat, *or pagoda, houses statues of Buddha, usually those considered the most sacred. All sacred events (such as ordinations) are performed here.*

Holidays and Celebrations

Of the many Buddhist holidays, the celebration of *Pi Mai* or Lao New Year is the most widespread and popular. It may fall on any day between the sixth waxing moon period in April and the fifth waxing moon period in May—usually taking place between April 12 and 15. The New Year celebration is rooted in an ancient Lao legend in which the daughters of a god offer him thanks for preserving the plentiful rainfall and the fertility of the earth. It is a time of rejoicing and rejuvenation. The days are getting longer, plants and vegetation start to grow again, and streams and ponds are filled with water and fish.

It is also a time for saying thanks and asking forgiveness for past wrongs. On New Year's day most Lao people clean the altars in their houses, including the statuettes of Buddha. They also thoroughly clean their houses and yards. Similar activities take place in the pagodas and temples. Buddhist monks bring Buddha statuettes so that the people may come and pour perfumed water over them. While bathing the Buddha statuettes, the people pray for well-being for themselves and their loved ones, and that this water will wash away their sins and misfortune. They then pour water on one another and wish each other a happy New Year. This ceremony lasts one to two weeks, depending on the region. It is a time for young people to show respect to their elders by giving them a *Baci*, a well-wishing ceremony, in which the young ones ask for forgiveness for any wrongs they may have committed. In turn, the elders forgive them and wish them a happy New Year. Friends and acquaintances may also be included in this ceremony.



Above: Cleansing statues of Buddha symbolizes purification
Right: The Baci *is a well-wishing ceremony*

Lao Music and Crafts

Lao classical music and dances are very similar to those of the Thai and Cambodian people. Dance movements are stylized and highly symbolic. Folk music, also an essential part of Lao life, forms an integral component of all festivals and ceremonies.

Craftsmanship is highly developed in Laos, particularly in the production of an infinite variety of objects for household and farm use. Luxury items of high quality, such as silver bowls, golden belts, and wood and ivory carvings are also made. Weaving is probably the most highly-developed craft in Laos, practiced in every household (although almost exclusively by women). Gold and silver threads are woven into cotton or silk articles that are unusually beautiful in their frequently complex design.

Above: The khene *and the xylophone are two Lao musical instruments*
Below: Bamboo work is very popular and a traditional craft in many Lao homes

Food and Eating Habits

Because of the many nationalities in Laos, there is a wide variety of food available. Favorite foods include sticky or sweet rice, *Podek* (a Lao style fish sauce), fish sauce, hot peppers (especially fresh ones), and lemon grass. Most of these ingredients can be found in Oriental grocery stores in America. Other foods that the Lao enjoy are beef or pork tripe, beef bile, and beef or deer digestive fluid (for bitter flavor). Lao in the U.S. look for opportunities to hunt deer or hope to find someone to slaughter cattle for them because they like to eat fresh meat. One favorite Lao dish is *Lap,* a chopped meat dish which is usually served rare or raw. Fresh fruit and vegetables are also popular.

In Laos, most families sit on the floor around a low rattan or bamboo dining table. Sticky rice is usually eaten by hand, but spoons, forks, and chopsticks may also be used. Some people from the cities prefer using a Western-style dining table. The family does not start to eat until the head of the family gives the signal. "Grace" is said after the meal, but individually. The Lao devote a great deal of time and effort to the preparation of food. For them, cooking is an art.

The Lao stress the importance of meal time and are well known for their hopsitality. Anyone arriving at meal time must be invited to share the meal. Lao always provide for extra guests when they cook, which is easily done because most dishes are served family style.

Lap, *sticky rice and* khaopoon *(similar to spaghetti) are common foods in Laos*

Education

In Laos, children go to public school when they are six years old. Kindergartens and pre-schools are usually private, with high tuition rates. Students must pass an exam before they can graduate from elementary school after the 6th grade. Some students leave school to seek employment after passing this exam. After completion of the 10th grade, they must pass another exam. Again, many students leave school and seek employment, perhaps with the police or armed forces, while others continue into the 11th grade or seek a scholarship for study abroad. Upon completion of the 12th grade, the student must pass the first half of the baccalaureate exam to enter the 13th grade and complete the secondary level. Before 1975, most students who completed the 13th grade and passed the final baccalaureate exam were sent abroad for further education, because such education is not well established in Laos.

Social Customs

The Western habit of shaking hands is becoming common between men in Laos, although it is not a traditional form of greeting. Lao do not typically shake hands with older people, unless the elder offers his hand first. Men do not shake hands with women; women do not shake hands at all. The usual form of greeting or leaving is the *wai*, which consists of joining hands with open palms together, raising them from the chest or head depending on the degree of respect one wishes to express:

Between equals: up to the chest
To a superior: up to the face
To a teacher or parent: up to the head
To God: over the head

Lao never kiss as a form of greeting. In fact, it is shocking to most women to be kissed by a male or female in public.

It is considered extremely offensive to touch a Lao's head, because it is considered the most sacred part of the body. The feet have low status; pointing or moving something with your feet or putting your feet on a table in the presence of others is considered very rude.

THE HMONG

The Hmong is one of several ethnic groups that have been called "Miao" for centuries by the Chinese and other Southeast Asians. Some westerners have innocently adopted this term, although the people call themselves "Hmong" and strongly prefer the name, which means "freeman."

HISTORY OF THE HMONG IN LAOS

In the early 19th century, about 50,000 Hmong migrated from China to northern Laos to find peace, freedom and more land for farming. The Hmong population in Laos had grown rapidly to 350,000 by the mid-1960's. Located near the border of northern Vietnam, they have never had a peaceful life. Most of the Hmong men from 12 to 55 years old were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to fight the North Vietnamese and Lao communist forces in the "Secret War" in Laos, intended to block North Vietnamese expansion into South Vietnam. When the Royal Lao government collapsed, the Hmong were forced to flee the country or risk being slaughtered because of their involvement in American military operations for 15 years, including efforts to rescue American pilots who had been shot down over North Vietnam.

A few of the Hmong families were airlifted to safety in Thai camps, but thousands were abandoned, forgotten and left behind to run for their lives through the jungle. Those who remained have been sent to re-education camps, gassed, or killed.

During their 20- to 25-day walk from the hills of Laos to Thailand, many Hmong were assaulted, abused or killed. They slipped into the Mekong River at night aboard logs, makeshift rafts or even with lengths of bamboo underneath their arms like water-wings to make their break to freedom. Hundreds drowned or were assaulted during the attempts. Once the survivors made it across the river, they were placed in jails and eventually into Thai camps.

Left: White Hmong in traditional dress at the New Year celebration
Above: A group of Blue Hmong girls pose in traditional dress

THE THREE TRIBES OF HMONG

There are some major cultural distinctions among the Hmong; the two major tribes are the White Hmong *(Hmoob dawb)* and the Blue Hmong *(Hmoob ntsuab)*. There is, moreover, a very small third group, the striped Hmong *(Hmoob txaij)*. The most noticeable differences between the tribes are in dress. Blue Hmong women wear dark blue and white pleated skirts with embroidered borders and a long black apron

which covers the front only. The White Hmong women usually wear black pants. The only time they wear their white skirts is during the New Year celebration.

The main differences in dress between the men of these two tribes are the longer jackets, and the longer rise of the pants among the Blue Hmong. Shorter jackets, exposing the abdomen, and pants with a shorter rise are worn by the White Hmong men.

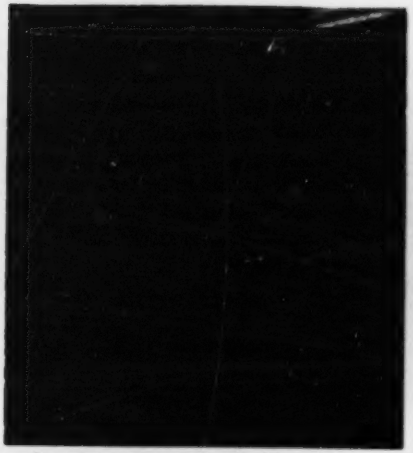
Their languages are similar, except for differences in certain words and pronunciations. The problem is similar to an English person who has difficulty understanding an Australian.

Most of the men like to hunt wild game, but do this more for sport than necessity. Among themselves, they have a brisk trade going all the time. Some are specialists in blacksmithing, cloth-making, silver smithing, saddle-making, millstone-chipping, wooden fixture-making, and even gun-making and repairing.

The Hmong of all tribes are famous for their applique and reverse applique work. Small pieces of fabric are sewn on top of each other, and some are cut and folded back to reveal layers of other color underneath.

FAMILY LIFE

A Hmong household consists of the eldest male, his wife or wives, children, unmarried brothers and sisters, and sometimes grandchildren. The family is the primary institution of the society. Order and authority in the household are maintained by respect for age, tempered by recognition of capacity. Younger brothers respect their older brothers, sons respect their fathers, and nephews respect their father's brothers in order of their age.



The Clan

The Hmong are an intensively clannish people who put a great deal of trust in their leaders. Clans consist of those persons who share the same paternal ancestry. There are 21 different clans in the Hmong society, but 13 of them—Cheng, Chang, Hang, Heu, Kue, Lo, Ly, Moua, Thao, Vue, Xiong, Vang and Yang—are larger in number than the other eight. All clan members are considered to be brothers and sisters. Men remain members of the same clan all their lives, but women normally change from one clan to another by marriage. Membership in a distinctive spiritual community is the criterion of clanship. Admission to a clan is by birth, marriage or adoption.

Each clan is directed by a leader who oversees all relations with other clans. The head of the clan has particular powers that permit him to communicate with deceased ancestors of clan members in specific rituals.

Left: A typical Hmong home
Above: Silversmithing is a common trade among Hmong men

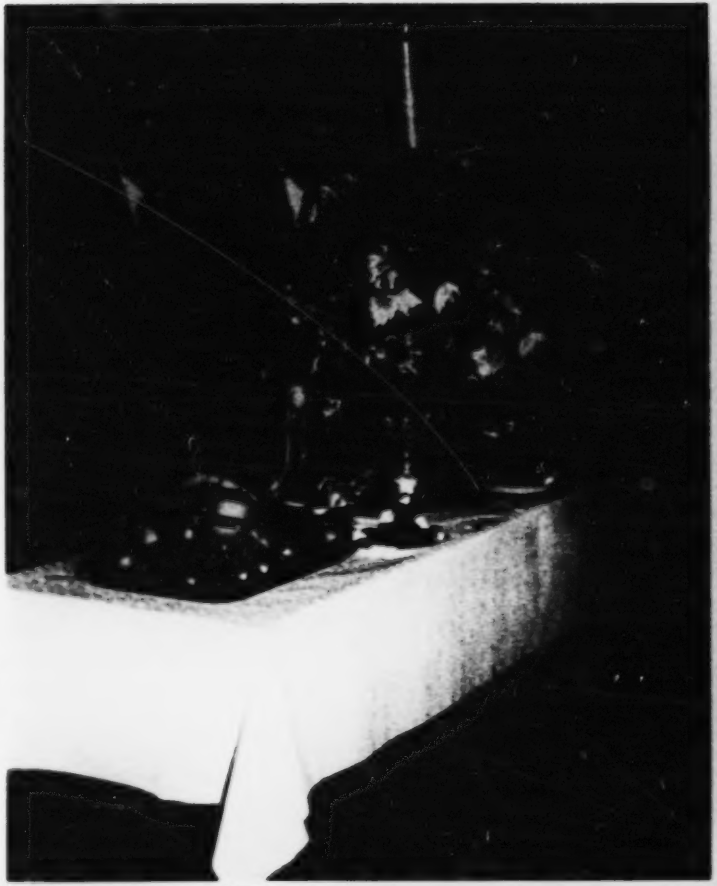
Marriage

Marriages, which are a form of social exchange, are the concern of whole families, and less intensely, of the clan groupings of which the families are a part. The arrangement of a marriage follows the patterns of authority and respect within the family, based upon age and sex, but also takes into account individual rights and the desirability of achieving general agreement. A father usually has the right to propose marriage for his sons and to judge those proposed by them or others for his daughters.

It is difficult to determine the average age of marriage in Hmong society, but boys and girls usually marry between the ages of 14 and 18 years. One of the factors contributing to an early marriage is the need for additional family members to work in the fields and in the house. A man would also be afraid that people may cast doubts about his virility if he delayed marriage beyond this time.

The bride-price is usually arranged by both sides. "Buying a wife" does not indicate that a wife is considered chattel, which can be bought and sold the same as any property. The idea of paying the bride-price is to assure the wife that she will be highly valued, and hence probably well-treated by her husband's family.

A man can have more than one wife. There is no moral sanction either for or against it, and its major purpose is generally economic. The actual situation of the wives is often not so fortunate; the second wife usually has less prestige than the first, and the senior wife often feels hurt by the competition of the younger woman for her husband's affection and attention.



Hmong wedding ceremony

Childbirth

Right after the delivery, the baby is cleaned and the cord cut. If the baby is a male, the placenta is buried near a post that stands in the center of the house. (A Hmong house is supported by five posts—one in each corner and one in the center.) It is believed that when the child grows up, he will be responsible for the house spirits. It is for this reason that a Hmong refugee may ask to keep the placenta after a son is born in the United States. The middle post and the priest altar (a wooden shelf jutting from the wall at a height of about five to six feet about the floor, supported by strings fastened to the wall) are the most important places in a Hmong house.

The mother and the baby are given a place to sleep beside a small stove near the door for three days. After that, they may return to sleep in the bedroom. For about 30 days after the delivery, the mother should eat chicken with well-cooked rice, because it is believed that the chicken will enable her to regain her strength quickly. It is believed that other food would poison her. Also during the first 30 days, no pregnant women is permitted to visit the mother, if the mother breast feeds her child.

Death and Funeral Customs

A person is believed to have three souls which separate upon death. One is destined for heaven, or the "abode of the dead"; one remains in the grave; and one becomes re-embodied. The departing souls must be shown the right "roads" to reach heaven. The funeral ceremonies vary according to tribe or clan, but a period of exorcising the evil spirits from the dead before burial is common and considered important.

When an old person dies, the corpse is kept inside the house for three to ten days and, in certain circumstances, even longer. The corpse must be kept in the house until the deceased's children and relatives arrive and until there is an auspicious day for burial. Even though that day may occur reasonably soon after the death, it may have to be by-passed if the coffin is not finished.

While the corpse is kept in the house, relatives and neighbors of the dead person will come to visit and to comfort the inhabitants of the house. This also fulfills a social function for relatives. They will exchange news about people and crops, and discuss the prosperity of various villages.

The corpse is usually buried in the afternoon. The Hmong believe that the spirit of the dead person should depart as the sun sets, so that the soul will not come back often to make a nuisance of itself.

Within a year after the death, a ceremony must be held to release the soul of the dead person. If they do not hold this ceremony within this period, the spirit may harm them because it cannot be reborn.

LANGUAGE

The Hmong language is tonal. An affiliation to any other known language has never truly been established. The various dialects of the three tribes may be mutually intelligible or differ considerably.

The Hmong alphabet was designed in the early 1950's by Catholic and Protestant missionaries using the Roman alphabet. Most of the Hmong Catholics and some of the young Hmong should be able to read and write Hmong. Those who

are between 18 and 45 years of age may read and write Lao, although poorly.

Names

Three days after the delivery of a child, a name is chosen. The child will be addressed by the given name until old enough to socialize. After that time, either the surname or given name may be used in first position, depending on the individual's preference.

When a Hmong man becomes a father, a mature name ceremony will be held to give him a new name to indicate that he has passed from one stage of life to another entailing more responsibility. This ceremony can be held anytime after he has a child, depending on his wealth and on the arrangement with his in-laws.

Given Name: Sao
Clan Name: Thao
Mature name could be: Chu Sao Thao.

When a Hmong woman becomes a mother, she may be addressed as *Nia* (mother), adding either her first child's name or her husband's name.

Her full name: May Xee Vang
Her first child's name: Tou
Her husband's name: Sue
She may be called either Tou Nia (Tou's mother)
or Nia Sue (Sue's wife)

A Hmong woman continues to think of herself as a member of her father's clan even after marriage. In the U.S., when asked for her family name, a woman will give her father's clan name. This proves confusing to sponsors, social service providers and school officials.

Hmoob tsis txawj	Tiam sis ntse
Thov nej nthe	Thov nej qhia
Thov nej ntsia	Lawv lub neej
Kom vam meej	Raws siab nyiam
Saib lwm tiam	Lawv puas txawj
Txaus los txhawb	Lub teb chaws

Hmong are illiterate .... But smart

Please advise them ..... Please teach them

Please look after ..... Their new life

For the success ..... That they wish,

Hopefully, for the ..... They may/may not be
next generation educated enough

To support ..... The country

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Religion

Although many Hmong become Christians or Buddhists, some retain the Chinese religious customs that they had adopted before coming to Laos. The Hmong believe in many supernatural beings: gods, spirits of places, household spirits, malicious spirits, and spirits of the dead. They also believe that men and all living things have souls which return to an afterworld when they die and there await reincarnation. The beliefs and ritual practices of the various clans are generally the same, but subclans differ in the detail of their beliefs and practices. Supernatural beings are involved in every aspect of Hmong life.

Hmong animism has much ritualism, though actual beliefs are limited to that of the existence of good and evil spirits and the "three souls" concept. They do not actually worship their dead ancestors or any divine beings, and they have no temples or images. They believe that all spirits and souls must eat and drink in order to live. Whenever the spirits and souls are hungry, they may cause human beings to become ill. So in order to keep themselves healthy and prosperous, the Hmong have to work hard to earn money or food sufficient not only for themselves and their dependents, but also for the spirits and souls.

The New Year ceremony is the most important, when offerings are made to spirits and ancestors to insure good fortune for the coming year

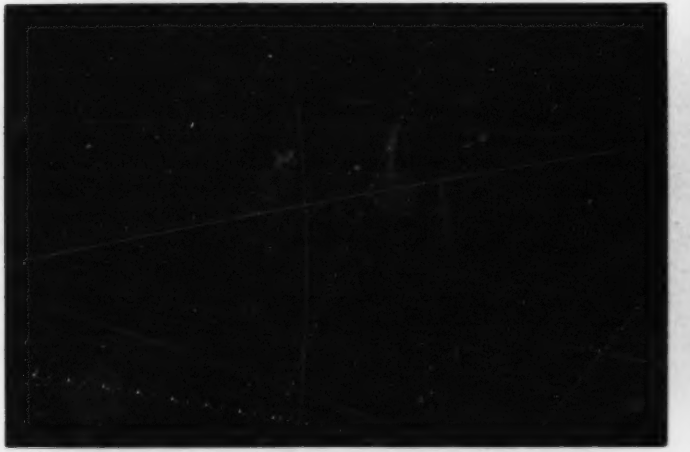
Holidays and Celebrations

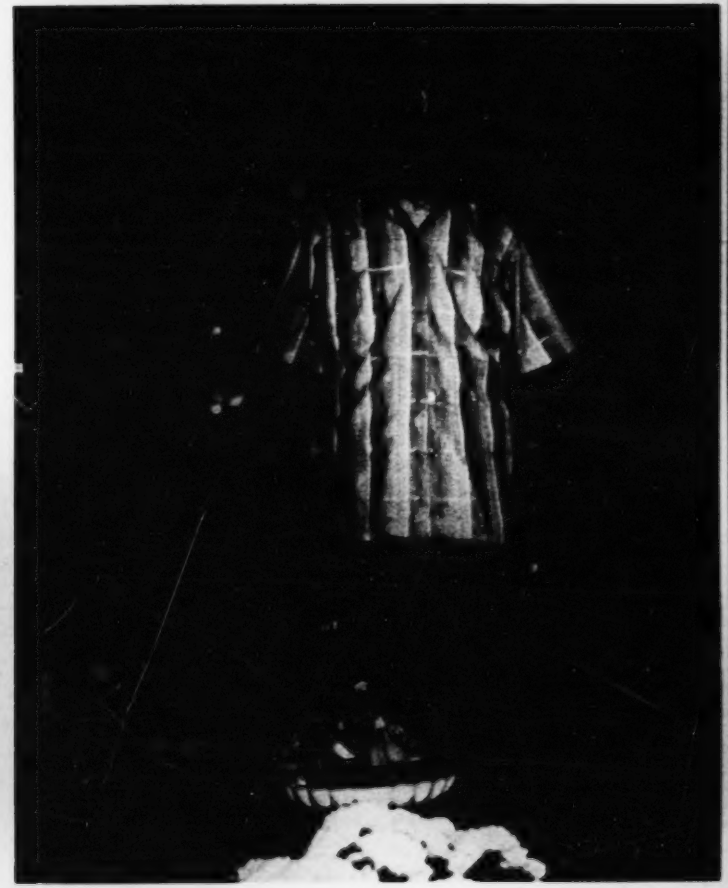
The Hmong wear their ritual clothing only during the New Year celebration. Traditionally, Hmong do not have weekends, vacation time or days off, and the only holiday they celebrate is the New Year. The Hmong have many kinds of ceremonies, such as birth and death ceremonies, protection ceremonies, curing ceremonies and agricultural ceremonies, but the New Year is the most important. This ceremony usually starts in December when the moon is darkest. It is held to thank all the gods and ancestors who have helped them throughout the year. During this period all the spirits, gods

and ancestors must be called upon to attend the ceremony. All the people should be at home. Their souls—which may have wandered—must be called back to stay in their bodies. Pigs and chickens must be killed as offerings to those spirits, so that during the coming year the people can receive, many times over, what they have given the spirits.

On the last day of the New Year celebration, every household lights joss sticks to inform the spirits that the ceremony is over and to ask them to look after the people to bring good fortune to their lives. They then return to work.

Below: Hmong New Year dance
Right: Calling a spirit to help someone who is ill





Food and Eating Habits

Hmong usually eat three meals a day. Breakfast consists of a light soup with rice. Soup (pumpkin, vegetable, chicken and pork), non-glutinous rice, fried and steamed meat (chicken, pork and beef) are served for lunch before noon time. Their dinner, which is served late in the evening, usually consists of the same type of food as their lunch.

When there are guests at any time of the day, they are offered something to eat, even in the host has already eaten. Hmong would not visit friends or relatives at meal time. If the guests come at meal time, they will be invited to join the host. The guests will try to refuse the offer, even if they haven't eaten yet.

For eating, spoons and forks may be distributed to everyone. Most Hmong, except those who belong to the wealthy families, cannot afford to buy enough plates for the members of the family. Traditionally, foods were placed in the middle of the dining table and members of the family shared forks and spoons to eat. Using hands to dip into the soup to pick up pieces of meat is considered impolite.

Education

Many Hmong are totally unable to read and write in any language. They teach their children orally. They count days, months and years by marking dashes on the walls or by cutting small marks on pieces of wood.

The Hmong did not have access to Lao schools until the 1960's, when they were forced to move from the mountains, where there were no schools, newspapers, books or signs, to the lowlands. Even then, few had the opportunity to learn writ-

ten Hmong or Lao during the turbulence of the war years and subsequent flight from Laos. Some young boys and girls of wealthy Hmong families, however, had been sent away to schools in large towns and cities.

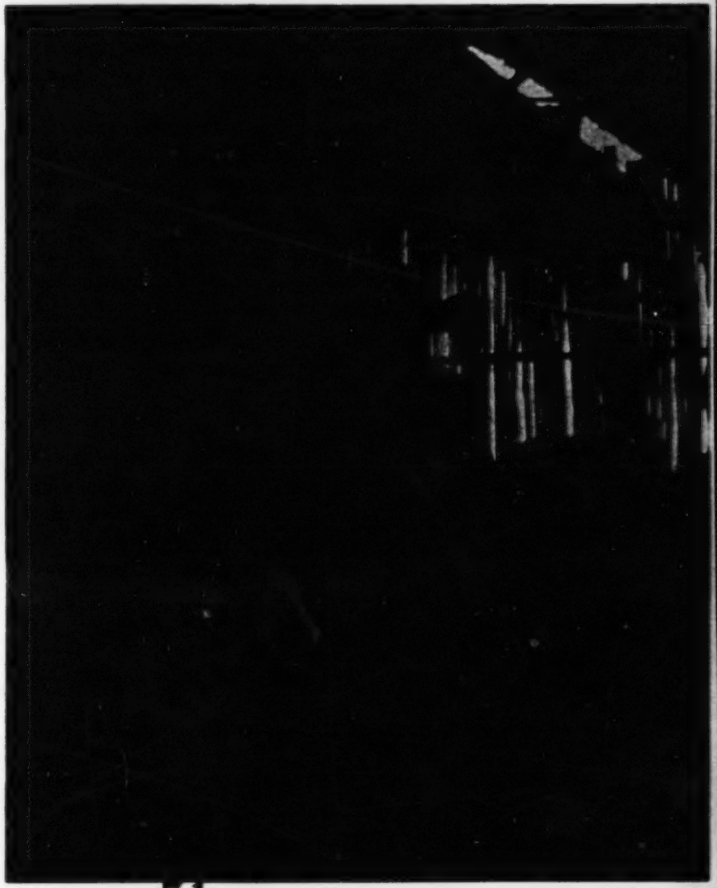
The level of formal education for Hmong resettled in the United States is likely to be low. Older people, especially women, will probably be illiterate. Since they are coming to a country where there are many kinds of educational opportunities, they are eager to go to school. The Hmong believe that education can bring a better future. Because of the language barrier and many cultural gaps, however, Hmong may face traumatic experiences in adjusting to an unfamiliar culture, and in achieving social and economic self-sufficiency.

Social Customs

The Hmong are a happy people at festivities or events which call for social gatherings. The men may become quite noisy and obnoxious when drunk. Most women will hide and quietly recover from their drunkenness. The children play games chasing each other, and the older teenagers will spend time courting, singing love songs and playing the reed pipes.

A Hmong does not court his girl in her house; it is considered an insult to the girl's parents. Additionally, the spirits in the house do not approve of such behavior from young unmarried couples.

The Hmong are usually very hospitable people. They will not hesitate to bring out the whiskey which has been fermenting for months, and stay to visit until late into the night. Women almost never participate in such social visits with strangers. They retire early since they must get up long before daybreak to begin their numerous daily chores.



THE MIEN

Originating in central China about 2,500-3,000 years ago, and a member of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages, the Mien were originally related to the Hmong ethnic group. Ancient Chinese historical records mention the Mien (who were called "Yao") as early as 1,500 B.C.

HISTORY

Centuries of steady encroachment on their territories by expanding Chinese populations forced Mien clans into mountain areas and southward. Their movements brought some groups into northern Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, but major population centers still remain in the Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces of South China. Total numbers are not known, but estimates have been as high as two or three million. Perhaps 200,000 were located in Vietnam prior to World War II, while 30,000 or more have been in Laos and 20,000 in Thailand. The Mien refugees in the United States fled Laos in 1975, when the communist government came into power there. These Mien had been closely associated with U.S. government operations in Laos prior to that time. Since their resettlement in 1976, their relatives continue to join them in the United States.

FAMILY LIFE

Marriage

Marriages are arranged by parents, although the wishes of the young people are usually considered. A marriage is a binding contract, and divorce is rare.

Fathers and older brothers make the initial arrangements,

determine if the couple's horoscopes are compatible, agree on a bride price and set the date for the wedding. The bride will be ritually incorporated into her husband's family lineage, although she does not lose her clan name. She defers to her husband, his parents, brothers and paternal uncles. The Mien woman often controls the family budget, however, and is active in small business ventures. Her costume is unique and regal, with beautiful cross-stitch patterns covering her dark blue trousers and red wool fringe displayed on her long, dark blue coat. She is responsible for making all her family's clothing.

Childbearing

The expectant mother does not talk of being pregnant, nor does the father or family appear aware of it. It is beneath a man to talk or think of such things, and it is important to conceal the matter from ever-hovering evil spirits. A mother may be ill at ease if outsiders compliment her "pretty child," because she fears that spirits may harm the child.

Grandmother is usually in attendance at the birth and is known as the "mother" in the home. The baby's mother is called by a term meaning "elder sister, one who nourishes and cares for" the child. The new mother remains at home and refrains from eating certain types of food for the first month after delivery.

Traditional Mien cross-stitch patterns are beautiful and intricate

LANGUAGE

The Mien language has six tones, 33 consonants and nine vowels. It is only in recent years that the language has been reduced to written form—using either the Thai or Roman alphabets.

Traditional literature is a "ritual language" written in ancient Chinese. Treasured, timeworn, handsewn booklets contain the rituals and lyrics of their history and traditions. A few men in each lineage can read the books and chant the lyrics—a popular form of entertainment. The ideal education for a son

Left: Mien children in traditional dress
Below: Mien women transfer their language into written form, using the Roman alphabet

is the mastery of basic Chinese characters used in ritual and geneological records.

The majority of Mien are illiterate in their own language. In recent years there have been young people enrolled in Lao schools, so a segment of youth can read and write Lao to some degree.

Names

Mien call themselves "the twelve clans," although there are actually many more than that. Families from many of those clans now reside in the United States, Chao being the most numerous. Other clan names found in the U.S. include Lee, Phan (Pien), Yang and Sio.

Because the Thai language uses a prefix, *sae* , before saying Chinese, Hmong or Mien clan names, *sae* has slipped into recorded Mien names: sae Chao, sae Lee, sae Phan.

Children are given numbers at birth, along with their fathers' individual names. Chinese numbers are used for sons, Mien numbers for daughters. Fay Ching, for example, is "fourth daughter of Mr. Ching." Sometimes a child is named for something that takes place at the time of his or her birth. Sons are later given a "generation" name, as well as an "individual" name, which later becomes his children's family name.

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Religion

Mien practice animism, with a host of gods and nature spirits. Ancestor spirit rituals are central to Mien philosophy. The living and the dead are interdependent, the well-being of each resting with the other.

Funerals are important, especially for adults. White is a mourning color, and a son will show his respect by wearing a white armband or white clothing as he functions in the position of "chief mourner." The ritual ceremonies are essential to show loyalty and honor for the deceased and to give the soul a good "send-off" to the spirit world.

Food and Eating Habits

Rice, green vegetables or mustard greens, some red peppers, squash, and bamboo shoots comprise the Mien diet, depending on the season. Pork and chicken are used mainly at festival times and for guests.

TAI DAM

The Tai Dam are a relatively small ethnic group whose original homeland was in northern Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1975, warfare and subsequent communist takeovers forced the Tai Dam to flee first to Hanoi, then to northern Laos, then Vientiane, and finally to the United States. Most Tai Dam are able to speak and write Lao, in addition to their own language. Tai Dam continue to come to this country to be reunified with relatives here.

HISTORY

Originally living in Vietnam, the Tai Dam have always maintained their own cultural characteristics. They even had their own government for a short time in the early 1950's, but the growth of communism in Vietnam forced them to seek asylum in Laos.

Welcomed in Laos, the Tai Dam successfully resettled in that country—many became doctors, government officials, army officers, engineers, teachers and mechanics—until 1975, when Laos came under communist control. Because of their strong resistance to the communist takeovers in both Laos and Vietnam, most of the Tai Dam fled across the Mekong River, seeking sanctuary in Thailand. The majority were soon resettled in the United States, sponsored by the State of Iowa.

FAMILY LIFE

Family life is characterized by the size and closeness of Tai Dam families. The extended family is very important, and it is not unusual for more "distant" relatives (by American standards) to live together. All the elders of the family—including older brothers and sisters—are responsible for the younger members' upbringing. Great respect is accorded the elders. Children are expected to be obedient and well-behaved; they are not encouraged to perform and compete.

The traditional dominance of men over women has been tempered to some extent in recent years, especially since women began to receive Western educations and to work outside the home. Single women, however, are not usually allowed to go out alone with men.

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

While some of the Tai Dam are practicing Christians as a result of past missionary efforts, Buddhism and animism are more common. They are very tolerant of other religious beliefs.

Tai Dam burial ceremony

The Sue Kwon ceremony, performed to call spirits

Many Tai Dam have lived or studied abroad, or held high-level government and professional positions. Therefore, there is some familiarity with Western technology, although they may not be accustomed to using many machines and appliances.

Like other refugees from Southeast Asia, the Tai Dam live primarily on rice. They also eat fresh vegetables and fruit. Protein sources include fish and chicken and occasionally, meat. A variety of spices are used, including fresh ginger root, garlic, fresh coriander, mint and chili pepper. A variety of fish sauce is also very common in Tai Dam dishes.

Because of their involvement in anti-communist military efforts in the 1960's and 1970's, many Lao-theung were forced from their homeland.

THE LAO-THEUNG

The Lao-theung were the original inhabitants of Laos and include many individual tribes with a combined population of about 700,000. The term *theung* means "above" or "higher," and originated when these people lived on the Lao mountain slopes. There are approximately 700 Lao-theung now in the United States—mostly in California, although some have also settled in Washington State and Oklahoma.

The many Lao-theung tribes have their own languages, but they are also able to speak Lao. Some are illiterate in their own languages, while others read and write only Lao.

The Lao-theung practiced animism and Buddhism until around 1960, when most were converted to Christianity. Their New Year celebration occurs in November, during the full moon and traditionally coinciding with the rice harvest. Another festival is Cheung's Day, in honor of one of their greatest ancestors. The day begins with the making of offerings and ends with celebrations with friends and family.

The Lao-theung were involved in anti-communist military struggles in Laos in the 1960's and 1970's. As with many other ethnic groups, the communist takeover in Laos forced the Lao-theung from their ancient homeland.

Vietnam

Beautiful Ha Long Bay, Hanoi

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The shape of Vietnam has often been described as a bamboo pole balancing a basket of rice at each end. The rice baskets represent the rich alluvial deltas of the Red River in the north and the Mekong River in the south; the pole is the narrow mountain range connecting them. This "balcony on the Pacific," as earlier European explorers used to call it, is part of the underbelly of the Asian continent. Long and narrow, it curves down in a rough "S" shape for 1,200 miles from China in the north, pinches at the center to fewer than 50 miles, and broadens southwestward into the Gulf of Siam. Land area totals 127,000 square miles, about the size of the State of New Mexico.

The climate is tropical. From mid-September to March, air streams from the north bring cool and gentle rains along

Left: Highlanders offer sacrifice
Below: Irrigation is a communal endeavor

the whole east coast, and dry, sunny weather to the southern plains. From June to September, winds from the south bring tropical warmth and high humidity to the whole region. The summer brings the highest rainfall to all regions. Damaging typhoons sweep across the Vietnam coast irregularly between July and November, when very heavy rains occur.

Vietnam is a predominantly agricultural country, with an estimated 80% of the population (1979 estimates: 53 million) as farmers. A very small percentage (2%) includes minorities of tribespeople inhabiting the northern and central highlands with distinctive languages and customs. Also, there are about 1,500,000 Vietnamese of Chinese origin concentrated in the trading centers all over the country, and roughly 500,000 Vietnamese of Khmer origin living in the Mekong delta.

HISTORY

The ethnic Vietnamese are believed to be mainly descendants of a Mongoloid race who spread southward through the Red River delta. The Chinese conquered the area in the second century, B.C., and ruled for a thousand years.

After many revolts against China were attempted and failed during that long period of domination, the Vietnamese finally succeeded in regaining independence and founded the first national dynasty in 938 A.D. Subsequent invasions from the north were repelled, including the major one by the powerful Mongols in the late 13th century. In the 15th century, China tried again to re-establish its rule but was defeated by the Le dynasty after ten years of war.

Vietnam's sovereignty ended with the advent of French colonization which was achieved in 1883 and lasted for about 60 years. In 1940, the Japanese entered Vietnam with the consent of the Vichy government. In March 1945, Japan overthrew the French authorities and granted independence to Vietnam under Emperor Bao Dai, the last ruler of the Nguyen dynasty. In August 1945, only a few days after Japan surrendered to the Allies, Bao Dai handed over the imperial seal to Ho Chi Minh, who declared independence that September. Negotiations with the French to implement this independence failed, and the French-Indochina war began. It ended in 1954 at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, after eight years of enormous casualties. The 1954 Geneva Accord divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel, placing the North under Ho Chi Minh and the South under ex-Emperor Bao Dai, now Chief of State, who later lost control to his prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem, in a referendum.

After a few years of relative peace, the early 1960's were marked by a steadily increasing penetration of South Vietnam by Vietnamese communist guerrillas known as the Viet Cong. Beginning in early 1965, the pace of the war accelerated sharply. From being largely supportive and advisory, the United States' role increasingly became one of active combat, with U.S. troops engaging in operations designed to search out and destroy the guerrillas. During this period, the internal political situation in South Vietnam was in turmoil. After the coup d'etat in November 1963, during which President Ngo Dinh Diem was killed, rule was taken over by successive military regimes. Corruption was a constant problem, and the political unrest fueled Viet Cong efforts. Finally after persistent peace talks and negotiations, a Peace Agreement was signed in Paris on January 27, 1973.

The Peace Agreement was intended to bring about a ceasefire throughout the country, the beginning of negotiations between the two Vietnams toward a political settlement, and the withdrawal of foreign military forces. All U.S. forces were withdrawn within the stipulated 60-day period. While South Vietnam lost the vital support of the United States and had too little time to consolidate its own strength, North Vietnam continued a massive infiltration of troops and military supplies. As a result, the defense system in the South rapidly disintegrated, and Saigon finally fell into communist hands on April 30, 1975, causing a massive and chaotic evacuation of at least 100,000 people in only a few days.

The DMZ: Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel for 21 years

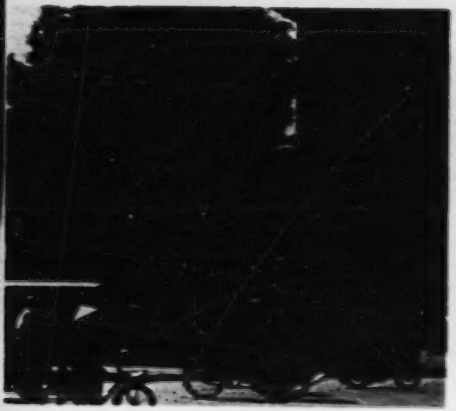
THE PEOPLE OF VIETNAM

About 85% of Vietnam's population is ethnically Vietnamese. The remaining 15% includes three principal minority groups:

Chinese. The ethnic Chinese population is estimated at about two million, nearly all of whom have adopted Vietnamese nationality. Most, however, faithfully observe Chinese customs and traditions. Essentially merchants and tradespeople, they usually group themselves into highly organized economic colonies in the urban areas, and play an important role in the country's economy.

Montagnards. This second largest minority group lives in the mountains of northern and central Vietnam. They total about 800,000 and include more than 30 tribes, representing numerous social, dialectical and cultural patterns.

Khmer. The Khmer population is estimated at about 500,000, clustered in the Mekong delta area. They retain their own language and religion, although a number have adopted Vietnamese nationality, have inter-married, and share Vietnamese customs.



Above: Fishing boats off the central coast
Left: Saigon marketplace
Right: Highlanders relax with rice wine

THE VIETNAMESE

FAMILY LIFE

The family represents the chief source of social identity for the individual. Members of the same household live and work together and frequently meet with a wider circle of kin for marriages, funerals, lunar New Year celebrations and rituals marking the anniversaries of their ancestors' deaths. Vietnamese look first to their families for help and counsel in times of personal crises.

The Vietnamese family structure is paternal. A married woman joins her husband's family and, after her death, it is in his family that her soul is venerated. Filial piety is considered one of a person's most important duties. The traditional Vietnamese household consists of three generations—usually a senior couple, a married son and his wife and children, and the senior couple's unmarried children.

A typical highland home is built on stilts

Đi lâu mới biết đường dài,
Ở lâu mới biết con người
phải chăng.

Just as the length of a road
is known only by actually traveling
on it,

The qualities of a man are known
only by living with him for a
long time.

LANGUAGE

Vietnamese is the official and predominant language of Vietnam. It is basically monosyllabic, and has six tones, which give it a sing-song effect. The three main dialects of Vietnam, which correspond to the country's geographic regions—north, central and south—are about as different from one another as those of American English. They are characterized by small differences of pronunciation and vocabulary.

Early in the 20th century, Vietnam adopted a modified Roman alphabet to replace the old writing system adapted from Chinese characters. Since Vietnamese is a tonal language, the Romanized writing uses diacritical marks with vowels to indicate the appropriate tones. This new writing system has greatly facilitated teaching the language. Vietnamese children of school age take only a few months to learn how to read and write their language, while learning Chinese characters required several years of study.

The French language was used in government administration and education from 1904 until 1945, when Vietnam proclaimed its independence. French was taught as a foreign language, but with the American involvement in the late 1960's, the use of English increased and eventually took precedence.

Names

Vietnamese names are written in reverse order of American names: family name—middle name—personal name.

The family name is placed first as an emphasis on a person's ancestry. There are about 300 family names for a total of 50 million people through the country. The most common is Nguyen, which is used by about 50% of the population.

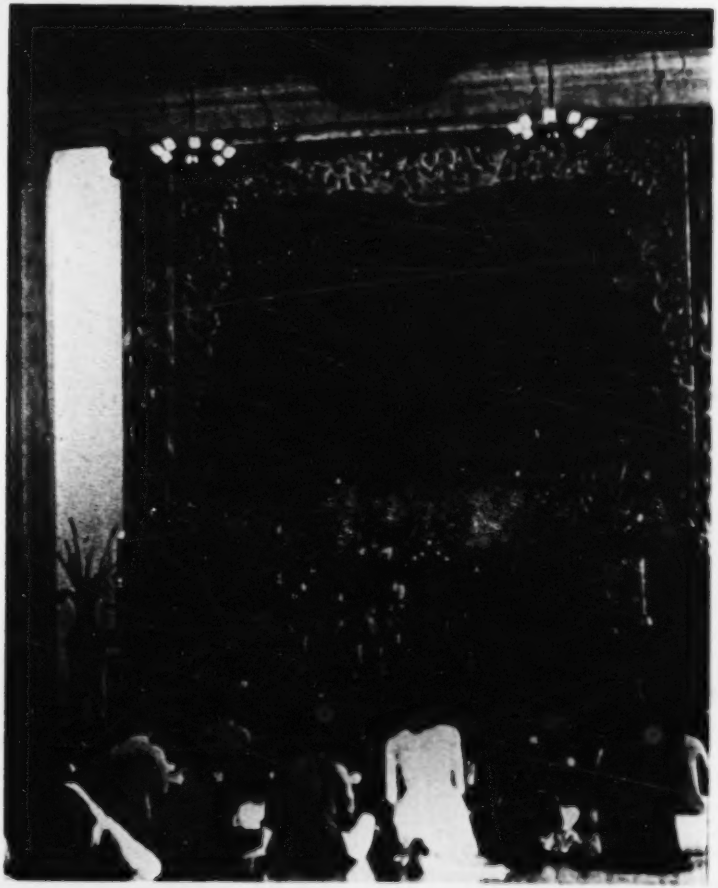
The middle name may indicate either the person's sex (*Van* for a male, *Thi* for a female) or family identity. It may also be merely ornamental.

The personal name often has a meaning which represents some precious object, some good quality or moral virtue.

A Vietnamese is addressed and referred to by his or her personal name. For example, Nguyen Van Hai would be called Mr. Hai—Hai being his personal name.

The Vietnamese woman, upon marriage, keeps her maiden name, although she would be referred to by her husband's given name. For example, the wife of Mr. Tran Van Nam would usually be called Mrs. Nam.

The situation regarding names is complicated further by the fact that some Vietnamese refugees have reversed their name order to comply with American custom, in order to avoid confusion and inconvenience in their new lives in this country.



CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

Religion

Although most of the people are known as Buddhists, they are also Confucianists and Taoists. The Taoist metaphysical concept of harmony, the Confucianist ethical and social principles, and the Buddhist theories of reincarnation and act retribution have been blended into a form of philosophy and religion known as "The Three Teachings." These have constituted the foundation of all traditions, customs and manners of the Vietnamese people.

Roman Catholicism has a place in Vietnam. For many decades, Christmas has been observed as a national holiday, and non-Catholic families have increasingly participated in Christmas celebrations from a secular point of view. Many Vietnamese Catholics maintain traditional Buddhist practices, such as ancestor worship, which is expressed through traditional rituals. This practice has become more noticeably explicit and widespread since the advent of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council under Pope John XXIII.

A Buddhist temple

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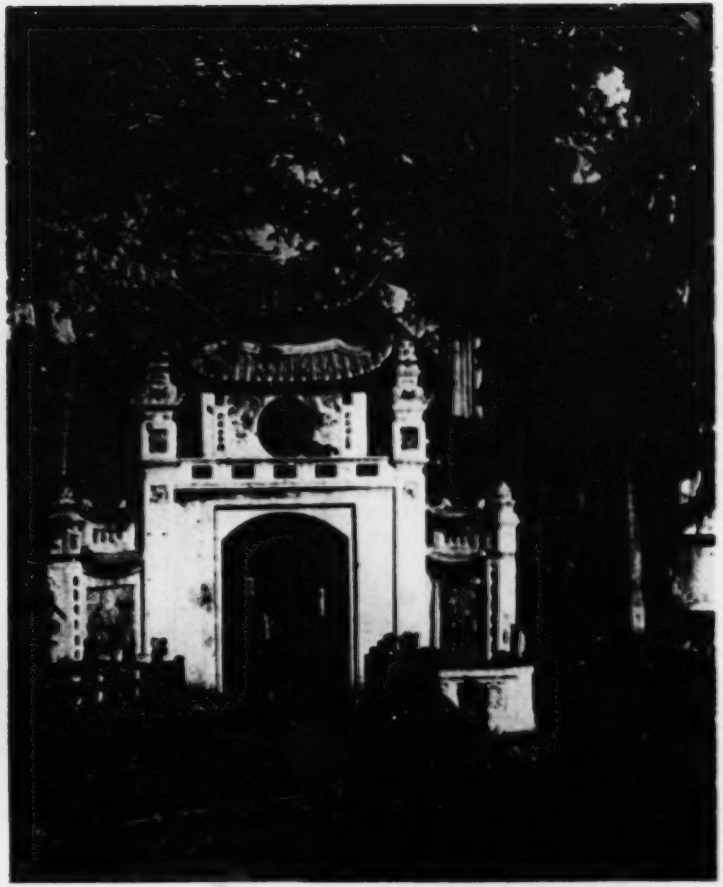

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On the facing page:
Above left: Dragon dance at a Tet festival
Lower left: An historic one-column pagoda, Hanoi
Right: Huc bridge and Ngoc Son temple, Hanoi

Holidays and Celebrations

The official holidays follow the Western-style calendar and have fixed dates. The traditional religious holidays are determined by the lunar calendar, and their dates change each year.

The most important and picturesque feast of the year is *Tet*, or Lunar New Year, which usually occurs in the month of February. It is a family reunion, a spring festival, and a national holiday. Since Vietnamese do not celebrate each individual's birthday, Tet is also considered everyone's birthday, because everyone is one year older on Tet. This is a time to pay homage to ancestors, visit family and friends, observe traditional taboos, and, of course, celebrate. Tet is also the time to correct faults, forget past mistakes, pardon others for their offenses, and pay debts. On this occasion, houses are specially decorated with flowering branches. Tet is usually celebrated for three days, although there is only one official holiday.

Fresh vegetables are sold daily at this market in Hue

Food and Eating Habits

The basic food in Vietnam is rice, supplemented by vegetables, eggs, and small amounts of meat and fish. Although somewhat similar to Chinese, Vietnamese cuisine uses less fat or oil for frying. Vietnamese are fond of fruits—bananas, mangos, papayas, oranges, coconuts, pineapple. They use chopsticks and small bowls for eating. *Nuoc Mam,* or fish sauce, is a principal ingredient in almost every Vietnamese dish.

The Vietnamese are accustomed to very little milk and milk products in their diet, and, like many Orientals, they are not genetically equipped with the enzymes needed to properly digest dairy foods. Their favorite drink is green tea, usually served hot, without sugar, milk or lemon.

The Vietnamese are used to having three meals a day: a light breakfast, a large lunch, and dinner.

Education

To the Vietnamese, education has always been extremely important, and educated people traditionally have held an honored place in society. Prior to 1975, Vietnam had a education system that was entirely under the control of the Department of National Education. The Department totally regulated the schools, from the recruitment and placement of teachers to the determination and implementation of curricula.

In principle, education in Vietnam was free and mandatory for all children from age six through the first five primary grades. Elementary schools offered a general program which was at once terminal in nature but also prepared the pupil for secondary education. The class was teacher-oriented, and the curricula were geared toward memorization and repetition. Respect for the teacher as a symbol of learning and culture was profound. Based largely on the French system, education was by observation, rather than by experimentation.

After the primary years, the child entered a secondary school, either studying vocational arts or the humanities and science. The secondary years were divided into two cycles, the first running for four years, and the second for three. Essentially, the second cycle intensified and broadened the student's knowledge or work covered in the first cycle.

Within the academic branch, mathematics, literature, philosophy, biology, chemistry, physics, French and English were important areas of study. Using the lecture method de-

veloped in Europe, the students were expected to memorize the subject matter, rather than engage in critical study. The elective system, as is used in the U.S., was unknown to Vietnamese students. As a result, Vietnamese students may find the American educational system bewildering, because its mode of learning is so radically different from their own.

Social Customs

Vietnamese show great respect to elders, superiors and strangers. To welcome them, they clasp both hands against their chests. Shaking hands has become familiar with people living in the cities, but has not been adopted by the villagers. Vietnamese women, even the educated, seldom shake hands with each other or with men. A smile and a nod would suffice to express a warm greeting. They may willingly shake hands with Westerners, however, to avoid embarassment for both parties.

Hugging between very close friends or relatives may be seen in some cases, but public kissing is not acceptable. Signs of explicit affection are strictly kept private.

Smoking is common among Vietnamese men, but only very sophisticated women would smoke in public.

Beckoning with a finger up is considered a sign of contempt used only toward an animal or an inferior. Between two equal people, it is a provocation. Therefore, if one must beckon to another, the palm of the hand is placed downward with a slight flutter of the fingers.

Because of their traditional sense of propriety, Vietnamese would make every effort to maintain peace and harmony in

Vietnamese show great respect to elders

communicating with others. A favorite motto in Vietnamese education is "Propriety comes first, knowledge second." As a result, Vietnamese tend to be excessively polite and delicate in dealing with strangers and respected people. Frankness and outspokenness are usually considered rude, and true feelings would often be veiled or communicated indirectly. This might be a source of misunderstanding between Vietnamese refugees and Americans. For example, Vietnamese may just smile when they do not understand you, or when they disagree but do not want to contradict you. You may even hear Vietnamese say "yes" when they actually mean "no." In this case, "yes" only conveys this idea: "OK, I hear you," or "Yes, I see what you mean." If you insist on clarification, you may get an even more puzzling answer: "Yes . . . No." "Yes" is a polite term that usually precedes any statement to show that a person is paying attention to another in a conversation. It has nothing to do with the statement, whether affirmative or negative, that follows.

For example, when a person is asked, "Are you hungry?" the answer might be "Yes, yes," which means "Yes, I am hungry" (In Vietnamese, "Da, co"). Or the answer might be "Yes, no" (in Vietnamese "Da, khong"), meaning, "Yes, I hear you (I am listening to you). I am not hungry."

Most often, "yes" is used to express an agreement with a negative question, which may be very confusing to an American. For instance, in answer to the question "Aren't you hungry?" any Vietnamese who is not accustomed to the American way would say "Yes," meaning "Yes, you are right. I am not hungry."

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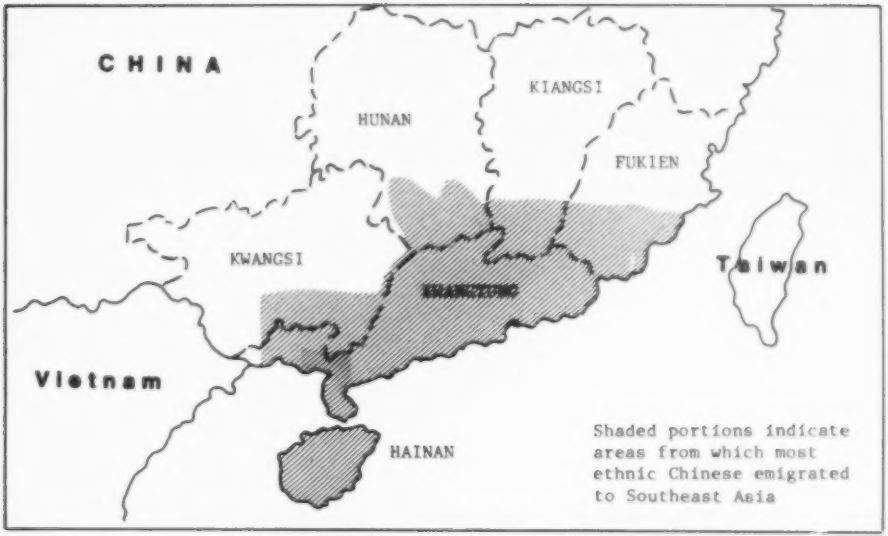
THE ETHNIC CHINESE



The ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are mostly descendants of migrants from China's coastal provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung (Canton). For many years, China experienced political turmoil, internal unrest and population pressure. Because of trading and business opportunities, the Southeast Asian countries became a favored region for migration. As a result there is a large population of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam as well as a sizeable minority in Cambodia and Laos. Nearly all of them have adopted Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese nationalities.

Ethnic Chinese in these countries form less than 5% of the populations, but their concentration in urban areas makes them a very conspicuous minority. Furthermore, because they engage primarily in commercial pursuits and tend to be successful in business, their economic influence is greater than their numbers.

HISTORY

After the fall of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to communism, the Chinese were victims of worse treatment than the natives of the individual countries. This is apparent in the case of the ethnic Chinese in Vietnam. After the communist takeover in April 1975, Sino-Vietnamese diplomatic relations became extremely poor. As a result, the Chinese in Vietnam became the target of purges due to economic nationalism as well as political motivations. The purge campaign reached a climax in July 1978, causing the greatest Chinese refugee exodus from Vietnam since 1975. Over 200,000 Chinese sought their way back to China through Hanoi, while hundreds of thousands of others fled Vietnam in boats, flooding the refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Many did not survive the trip to the country of first asylum.

The Chinese are known to be astute, hardworking and frugal people. They are mild in character. Usually, they are proud and self-reliant. They are famous for their flexibility and adaptability, and they have a hospitable nature.

FAMILY LIFE

A Chinese family is a tightly-knit group, believing that in unity there is strength. No matter what size a family is, there is a strong bond within both the nuclear family (parents and children) and the extended family (grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins). In times of need, a relative, whether close or distant, may be looked to for help. The bond among members of the family is close and emotional, and sometimes financial. This kind of relationship induces them to live close together, if not under the same roof. Their relatives mean much to them, so that keeping in touch on all kinds of holidays and occasions is important. Respect and priority is given to the eldest and the most important ones on all occasions.

Marriages

Marriages have traditionally been arranged and supervised by parents and elders whose authority and wisdom could not be contested, because marriage was an important event affecting the welfare and happiness of the entire family.

Things have changed in recent years. Nowadays, young people have more to say in selecting their mates. It is still not uncommon to see a few cases in which parents and elders exert a great deal of influence upon their children's choices. Males and females of the same family surname never intermarry. Cousins who do not have the same ancestral names may intermarry.

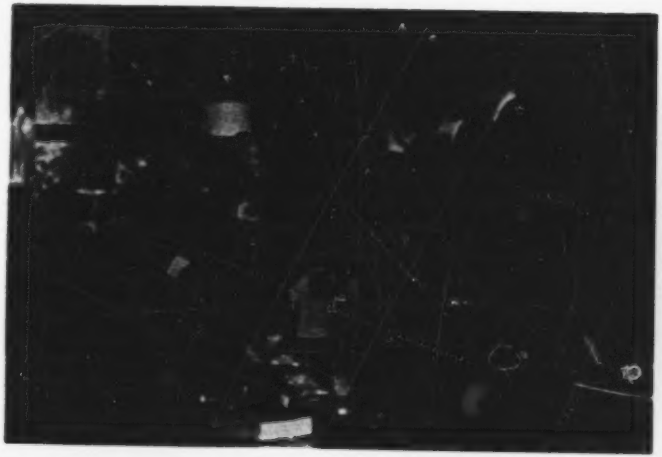
Childbirth

The birth of a child is considered a fortunate and happy event to the family, particularly to its elder members.

Traditionally, sons have been preferred to daughters. Friends and relatives will come and visit the family with presents, best wishes, blessings and "lucky money" in a small red packet for the newborn. Usually, the family has something to give in return. It is popular Chinese etiquette to return one gift for another.

It is a time of joy and warmth for the family. Sometimes, a

Great honor and respect is afforded the elders in a Chinese family



feast or party is given in honor of the baby at the age of one month. Joss sticks, or incense, are burned as a form of offering, and homage is paid to gods, ancestors and the "Spiritual Mother," who has been protecting the baby since its birth. Chicken and pork, as well as fruit and some white wine are served as offerings on such occasions.

Death Rituals

The death of a family member is as important as a birth. It is considered a blessing for parents to have their children at their side when they die. If the oldest family member dies, all other younger members of the same family are supposed to come home to pay tribute to the deceased, no matter where they are. Condolences are sent by friends and relatives to the survivors. Buddhist or Taoist rituals are performed to pacify the soul of the dead, and express the wish that the soul resettles peacefully and happily during the transition period before it can be reborn again. White dress is usually worn at the ceremonies. A black patch or armband is usually worn by members of the family from one month to a year after the deceased is buried. During this period, family members are traditionally discouraged from such enjoyments as going to the movies, theaters and nightclubs, or attending happy events such as weddings or parties. This restraint is practiced in honor of and out of respect for the deceased.

LANGUAGE

There is considerable diversity in dialects among the ethnic Chinese as well as some variety in customs. Five speech or dialect groups—which are mutually unintelligible—are of major importance in Southeast Asian Chinese communities:

Hokkien: Originating from the vicinity of Amoy in the Fukien province, the Hokkien comprises only 8% of the Chinese population in South Vietnam.

Teochiu: Migrating basically from Swatow and around the Kwangtung province, it accounts for 75% of the Chinese in Cambodia, a large group in Laos and the second largest in Vietnam. Its language closely resembles Hokkien.

Hakkas: These people speak the second most widespread dialect of Kwangtung. Their migration to Southeast Asia was a continuation of an earlier southward movement within China. "Hakka" can be translated as "family of guests."

Cantonese: This speech group came from around the city of Canton and is the largest in Vietnam.

Hainanese: Immigrants from the island of Hainan in Kwangtung province, these people were originally from the south of Fukien. The old dialect has peculiarities which separates it from the others.

The speech group distinctions have gradually become less important as a result of the popularization of the Chinese National Langauge (Kuo Yu or Mandarin) and more unified instruction in modern Chinese-style schools. Nevertheless,

their influence is still evident in occupational specialization, social interaction (including intermarriage), and settlement patterns.

People of the same dialect are close and members of the same clan will easily build up a relationship. They help each other emotionally, socially and financially, cooperating closely in business as if they were a large family.

Names

Chinese names are composed of two, three or sometimes four characters.

The natural order of Chinese written names is the reverse of the American order:

Family Name	Given Name
(one or two characters)	(one or two characters)

There are hundreds of major Chinese family names which are usually of one character; however, there are a few combined family names that are composed of two characters.

Traditionally, Chinese believe that naming a newborn baby has an effect on success or failure in the baby's life. Parents are very concerned about their children's prosperity, success, luck, happiness and well-being. Therefore, a name is very cautiously chosen by the parents, respected individuals in the family, or sometimes even a fortune teller.

Due to the different political and geographical regions where the ethnic Chinese live, most of them have adopted the nationalities of the countries in which they live. Their formal names may be a direct translation of Chinese into the native language or a new native name. Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish their ethnicity by looking at the names on their legal papers; the names may be Cambodian, Lao or Vietnamese. Many, however, still attempt to preserve their Chinese names. Most of the ethnic Chinese who have had a chance of getting Chinese education would work to maintain their ethnic identity.

Forms of Address

Chinese tend to employ formality and respect when dealing with others. That is why they like to put an appropriate or corresponding title in front of someone's name.

The Chinese have worked to maintain their distinct artistic and cultural traditions.

CUSTOMS, TRADITIONS AND BELIEFS

The Sino-Confucian tradition—with its emphasis on kindheartedness and righteousness, morality and ethics, propriety and sense of shame, filial piety and family ties, respect for elders and authority—is the concern of the Chinese and the Chinese-educated. Because of these predominant cultural traditions, ethnic Chinese are culturally and traditionally conservative. With the introduction of Western culture in the late 17th century—first the French, then Portuguese, and later the Americans—new concepts and values such as modernization and progress were brought in. Not many people adopted them fully. To a certain extent, they were aware of the Western culture, but were not always direct participants in it.

Because of dedicated efforts throughout the years and the size of their population, the Chinese have preserved their culture, traditions, customs and language. In urban and suburban areas in Indochina as well as a few urban areas in North America, Chinese schools are maintained, Chinese festivals, rituals of marriage and death are observed, and newspapers and broadcasts in Chinese are available.

Religion

Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism are the religions usually practiced by the Chinese. Other religions, such as Christianity or Judaism may also be practiced. The Chinese may also believe in ancestor worship, material offerings (food and money) and spiritual reverence to certain gods or objects.

In Chinese society, people believe in what they feel is most favorable to them. Belief in one religion or way of life does not mean that other religions or ways of life are rejected. This outlook enables a person not only to believe in more than one god, but is also emphasizes the co-existence of all supernatural beings. To be harmonious and not to offend forces, the usual aim of a worshipper is to establish a satisfactory relationship with all spiritual forces.

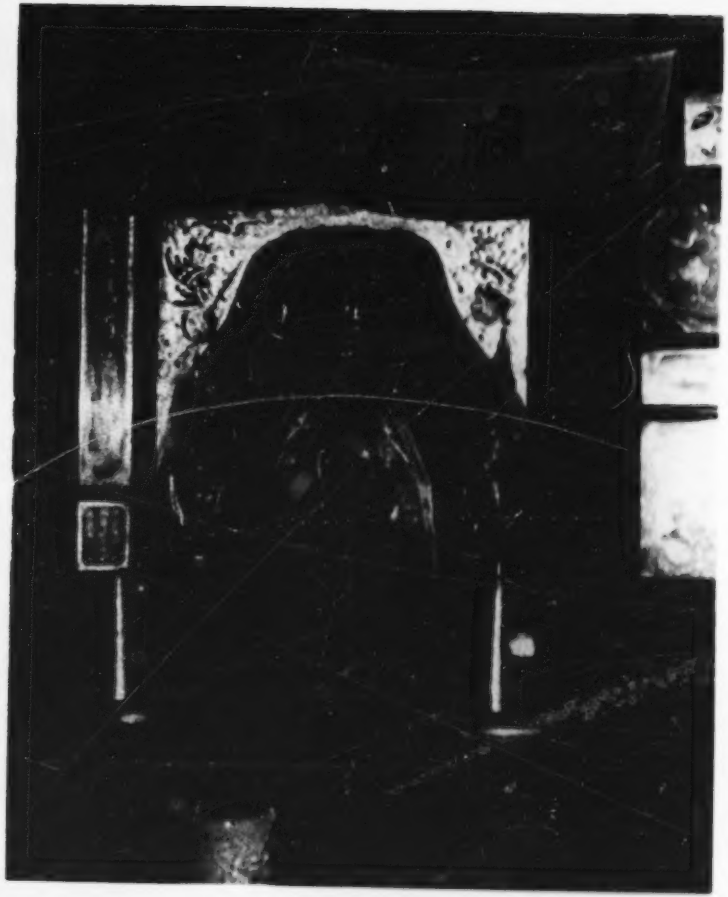
The Chinese resort to prayer for a specific purpose as it is needed. Although they ask favors of gods, it is not necessary to worship at the temple once a week. Consequently, as a person's activities expand and purposes multiply, his or her gods may become more numerous. Polytheism, belief in more than one deity, is thus accepted and even preferred by most of the ethnic Chinese.

There are many Chinese temples dedicated to the worship of popular gods or deities not directly connected with either Taoism or Buddhism. It is inaccurate to describe these groups as strictly Buddhists, Taoists, Confucianists or ancestor worshippers in the same sense that Americans, for example, call themselves Protestants or Catholics.

The Chinese believe in a wide variety of rewards and punishments which the gods place upon human beings in this world or the next. In a way of life that values mutual dependence, the individual never enjoys the sweets of life nor drinks its bitter dregs alone. Those who have done well may be reaping the fruits of their own previous life or the blameless career of their parents or remote ancestors—just as those who are in adverse circumstances may be paying for either their own crimes and sins or those of their ancestors.

Chinese temples are not necessarily strictly Buddhist or Taoist. Long, circular strands of incense may be suspended from the ceiling and burned in offering.

Ancestor worship is fundamental to Chinese religious belief. They believe they owe their fortunes or misfortunes to their ancestors. They also believe that material offerings—such as burning incense and even make-believe money or paper clothing—to their ancestors will prevent those ancestors from degenerating into spiritual vagabonds. Their present lot may be improved by the spiritual efforts of the departed ancestors. The spiritual welfare of departed ancestors may like-



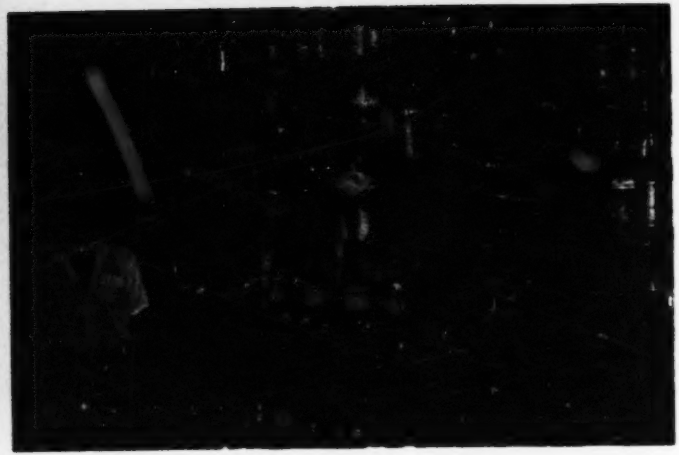
wise be increased or reduced by the worldly actions of the living descendants. It is important then in the Chinese family not only to care for older persons who are still living, but also for those who are deceased. For this reason, in the Chinese home, there may be an altar or place set aside for remembering and caring for deceased family members, as well as for worshipping gods.

Holidays and Celebrations

The Chinese New Year, which is also observed by the Vietnamese, marks the beginning of the lunar year. It usually falls in late January or early February. Each Chinese year is named after one of the twelve animal symbols of the Zodiac: Mouse, Buffalo, Tiger, Hare, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog and Pig.

On the Chinese new year, most people take a holiday to celebrate. People believe that they should have a long vacation after a hard year's work. Special foods are prepared and placed on ancestral altars before which members of the extended family come and take turns to thank their ancestors for their own existence. Relatives, friends and neighbors, on meeting, usually bow and congratulate one another on being a year older. Presents and good wishes are exchanged. Red packets containing cash are given by parents and elders to unmarried children as "lucky money." It is a time that hospitality and friendship must be offered, and a time for family reunions.

In addition to the New Year celebration, there are other kinds of festivals all year round in honor of the gods, goddesses, sages and famous people in their long and ancient history.



Food and Eating Habits

The Chinese live principally on rice, fish, vegetables and noodles. Chopsticks are used for eating by Chinese and other Asian groups who have been culturally influenced by the Chinese. They seldom eat bread at their meals. The Chinese like to try other countries' foods, but it is difficult for them to change the food tastes and appetites (especially the adults).

A common Chinese beverage is a weak concoction of black tea. A drink of hot or warm water, if tea is not available, is preferred to a drink of cold water.

Because of a lack of water purification in some parts of Southeast Asia, drinking cold water from the faucet would be regarded as unhealthy. Also, Chinese people do not have the habit of having cold drinks early in the morning. Chinese people usually show their hospitality by offering hot tea or drink to their friends and visitors.

Education

Education has been the foundation of Chinese civilization for centuries, so it was natural enough that Chinese immigrants developed and maintained their own primary schools. The different dialect groups were unable to understand each other, so separate schools were needed.

The teaching of Mandarin (Kuo-Yu) in school has given a common language to all groups and preserved their essentially Chinese character. In almost all countries, the Chinese set up high schools where permitted. In fact, some large cities have several famous high schools maintained by the Chinese.

In recent years, however, the number of Chinese classes taught in the schools has decreased. Bilingual education has been implemented, and in some areas, students are now required to learn the host country's language instead of Chinese.

In some thinly populated rural areas, Chinese schools may operate on a limited basis or not at all due to legal prohibitions which force assimilation of Chinese into the local society. Such people are likely to speak, read and write only the host country's language.

Social Customs

The following are some Chinese customs and attitudes of which you may want to be particularly aware.

The Chinese consider praising one another before third parties as an act of bad taste and are modest in accepting compliments from others.

Chinese usually would only share bad experiences and feelings with close relatives and intimate friends, not with strangers or mere acquaintances. They have been trained through many years of difficult situations to be skeptical, while at the same time considerate, in dealing with strangers or new things.

Right: the Temple of Jade, Saigon
Below: Tai Chi has been practiced for centuries to develop mental and physical discipline

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